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Principals' early career instructional leadership experiences in rural schools

by

Carolyn Suzanne Manard

A dissertation submitted to the graduate faculty

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Major: Education (Educational Leadership)

Program of Study Committee:

Douglas Wieczorek, Major Professor

Linda Lind

Joanne Marshall

Daniel Spikes

Jan Westerman-Beatty

The student author, whose presentation of the scholarship herein was approved by the program of study committee, is solely responsible for the content of this dissertation. The Graduate College will ensure this dissertation is globally accessible and will not permit alterations after a degree is conferred.

Iowa State University

Ames, Iowa

2017

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank my committee chair, Dr. Doug Wieczorek, and my committee members, Dr. Joanne Marshall, Dr. Daniel Spikes, Dr. Jan Westerman-Beatty, and Dr. Linda Lind, for their guidance and support throughout the course of this research. Their candid conversations, suggestions, and comments have helped me grow significantly during my dissertation process.

In addition, I would also like to thank my friends, colleagues, the department faculty, and staff for making my time at Iowa State University a wonderful experience. I want to also offer my appreciation to the 12 principals who were willing to participate in my interviews, without whom this work would not have been possible.

I especially want to thank my husband, Brad, and my two children, Jonathan and Benjamin, for all their encouragement and support during these years. They have stood by my side and have encouraged me to follow my dreams. They have all continued to support me and encourage me to pursue my Doctorate in Educational Administration.

ABSTRACT

I reported on findings from a phenomenological study intended to investigate the leadership experiences of 12 novice, rural public school principals in a Midwestern state. I utilized data from semi-structured interviews to analyze how novice, rural principals engaged in instructional leadership activities in a rural setting. I also focused on how new principals managed the challenges of leadership as they transitioned into their new positions in a rural setting. Framed by sensemaking, I situated the analysis within existing research on instructional leadership, particularly the context of principals' work and how they thought about and prioritized instructional leadership goals. My findings indicated that novice, rural principals wear multiple hats while juggling all that expected of a building principal. Although the principals spoke eloquently about their understanding of their role as an instructional leader, their day-to-day experiences are met with demands and expectations peripheral to instructional leadership.

Keywords: Instructional leadership, novice principals, rural school, principal development.

CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

Every year in schools all across the country, the 8:00 a.m., bell rings on the first day of school. All of the students go into their appropriate classrooms welcomed by a warm, friendly teacher, while the novice school principal stands in the hallway alone wondering what he or she should do next. In this case, he walks into the office area, nods and smiles at his secretary, proceeds to his own office, sits at his desk, and stares at his blank calendar wondering, “What do I do now?”

As a former public school principal of 12 years, I know this feeling is one that hits every novice principal on the first day of school. All their hard work scheduling and planning for months prior, starts to pay off as they see students following their new schedule and going to the appropriate classes. The classrooms are filled with excited learners and the hallways are clear. All of the planning and preparing has paid off. Novice principals wonder what to do next because students are where they are supposed to be, teachers are in the classrooms reviewing expectations for learning, and the novice principal is sitting in an office he has never occupied. Surprised, it also dawns on him that he can now use the restroom whenever he wants instead of waiting for a bell to allow him to do so.

Then the calls start to come in—from families requesting a different teacher for their daughter, to a family member telling the principal that students are already bullying her son. Novice principals use the skills they were taught when obtaining their administrator’s license, but it appears that few of the calls that come his way are situations that were taught; instead issues of discipline, climate, personnel, and helicopter parents come his way. Instead, the novice principal starts addressing issues using their

gut and intuition, hoping they make the correct decision. Lunch begins and the building principal is not responsible for supervising, but out of habit from his years of being employed as a teacher, the principal shows up to see how things are going. There is a feeling of not being needed in the same way, yet he needs to feel a part of the school and somehow being helpful to the staff. He realizes he is now in a service role.

Thankfully, the principal is present in the lunchroom because a conflict between two young boys starts to arise. Food starts to get thrown and trays are on the floor. Fists are elevated and ready to be thrown. The principal finds himself to be in the right place at the right time. He steps in between the two young boys, in the process getting punched in the back. When the principal takes the two young boys into the office, he asks if the boys know who he is and one young boy says, "No." The other boy answers, "This is the office, so are you the new principal?" The principal acknowledges that he is the new principal and introduces himself.

With the boys in front of him, the principal quickly reflects on his training to see if anything crosses his mind on how to respond to this incident. In his previous suburban school teaching experience, the police might have been called, yet in this rural setting, there is not a town police department. His only resource is the superintendent shared between his district and another whose office is located 15 minutes away in the neighboring community. When she is called she uses her mentoring skills and asks, "Well, what do you think you should do?" Not wanting to feel incapable, the principal tells the superintendent that he will take care of it. Feeling as if he is alone on an island, the principal comes to realize that he must make a quick decision to determine appropriate consequences. The rural principal feels like the island just got smaller.

The principal remembers a discipline strategy that they talked about in one of his courses and decides to separate the students and asks them to write down what they feel were the events that led to the fight. Once the principal feels as if the student emotions have settled down, they meet with each student individually. After listening to their interpretations of the events, the principal comes to find out that the two young men are cousins whose families were feuding throughout summer. Their mothers had gotten into a fight at a family picnic and the young men saw their moms get physical, so assumed that fighting was the acceptable response to solve the problem and were just defending their mothers.

The principal calls the mothers to explain what had occurred over the lunch hour with their sons and both mothers start to yell at the principal telling him that they allow fighting in their home, so the boys should not get any consequences at the school, and that the principal needs to stay out of their family business. One mother states, “Well, you’re new to town, you don’t know how we do things around here.” The two mothers also tell the principal that if they do anything to their sons, their fathers will be at the school tomorrow morning to straighten things out with the principal. The principal thinks to himself, “I wonder how big their fathers are.”

Knowing that he is not going to allow this type of behavior to disrupt the safe environment of the school, consequences must be given. The principal opens up the district policy manual to find the guidance and quickly learns, there is nothing specific. Then the principal turns to the student handbook which reads, “To ensure a safe environment, fighting will not be allowed and will result in disciplinary action.” The principal’s stomach starts to turn knowing that something must be done, and it is all on

his shoulders to make that decision. The principal decides to try one more resource—he calls their principal mentor to see if they have ever experienced anything like this.

Fortunately for him, the principal is told that this type of student behavior occurs often and the parent response is not unusual. The mentor lends a suggestion that in-school suspension is warranted and appropriate. The mentor also suggests that the young men do not serve the in-school suspension in the same room. Then with a little chuckle, the mentor states, “Welcome to administration!”

Except for the one incident over the lunch hour, the principal feels it has been a pretty good day. Right after student dismissal, a veteran teacher stops to visit with the principal to see how his day went, and mentions that he might want to check on the new special education teacher. As the principal walks down the school hallway, he reflects on the fact that the new special education teacher has significant experience with larger suburban schools. The principal previously wondered why the teacher would want to leave the higher paying, suburban school setting and move to a rural environment.

As the principal enters the classroom, he sees the new special education teacher sitting with her face down on her desk crying. Being the concerned, caring principal he has promised himself he will be, he asks what is wrong. She looks up and says, “The kids are so mean here. I thought moving to a more rural setting would be easier, but they are mean everywhere.” The principal gives her a pep talk on how he will support her to help her be successful. When the principal leaves the teacher, she has stopped crying, but the principal fears that the problem is much deeper than it may appear.

On the way home from school, the principal gets a phone call from his wife asking that he stop by the town market to pick up a few items for dinner. When the

principal walks in, a student from across the store yells, “Hey mom, that’s my new principal, and he got beat up today by a student at lunch!” The principal waves, smiles, and moves on down the aisle looking for hamburger buns. After gathering the necessary requested items, the principal stops and looks at the beer cooler, thinking to himself, “A cold beer sounds really good after a long first day of school.” As the principal is thinking this, a parent from the school walks by and says, “Tough first day as a principal?” This comment startles the principal, and he responds positively, “It’s always a great day helping kids in school.” He then quickly walks away from the beer cooler empty handed.

Next in line to check out, the principal overhears the cashier complaining about the new principal, and how he is getting involved in her family business. The cashier says to the customer checking out, “The jerk better not mess with my kid, or we’ll run him out of town!” The principal steps up to the counter to check out and hopes that the cashier does not recognize him. He suddenly feels like he wants to be invisible.

The principal grabs the grocery sacks and walks as quickly as he can to his car in hopes that no one else recognizes them. On the way home the principal reflects on the day, and wonders how he is to address all the managerial tasks that come up throughout the day and still be an instructional leader guiding teachers to ultimately improve instruction and student achievement.

This narrative describes composite encounters I have both experienced and observed over the years while serving as a principal in a rural setting. While it may appear uncommon, this narrative is based on real-life experiences involving novice, rural principals. The feeling of overwhelming pressure, isolation, and sense of urgency to make the correct decisions weighs heavily on all novice principals.

Being a principal in a rural setting adds another layer of complexity as resources are typically limited and communities are well established. Serving as a former principal and superintendent for thirteen years, I have had the wonderful opportunity to serve as a mentor for eight novice, rural principals. Time and time again the same questions and concerns come my way from novice, rural principals, thus shaping my professional career and ultimately motivating this dissertation. Professionally speaking, I went down the empirical path to understand what the research suggests about novice school principals' experiences and wanted to learn more about that phenomenon.

As they begin their principal career, various leadership styles are swimming through the novice principals' head, and they start to wonder if they will ever get time to be an instructional leader instead of dealing with management issues all day long. Novice principals were told during their coursework that principals are to be instructional leaders (Rallis & Highsmith, 1986); and principals who spend time in the classrooms and monitor classroom instruction as it is being delivered to the students can improve student achievement. On the surface spending time as an instructional leader sounds possible, but when students are getting sent to the office every class period to be penalized for discipline issues, and parents are calling needing to talk with the principal, instructional leadership seems to go out the window as management of running a school takes priority.

Each academic year new administrators are appointed to serve as a principals and leaders of their school buildings and are suddenly expected to know all the answers. Educational leadership research has firmly established the correlation between efficient principal leadership and successful schools. Effective educational leadership increases positive teacher-student interaction, shapes student development, and strengthens student

learning (Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004). As a result of various sociopolitical and economic developments, school principals have been confronted with an increasingly complex set of diverse demands and problems, often with strong moral connotations (Sleegers et al., 2016). Among the many tasks and responsibilities principals perform on a daily basis, collaborative instructional leadership has been shown to be one of the most important facets of principals' work (Marks & Printy, 2003; Robinson, Lloyd, & Rowe, 2008). Crossing over to the principal role represents a sizeable shift for most newcomers to the principal positions, who encounter a potentially abrupt change in perspective, expectations, and job-related tasks compared to their previous experiences in schools (Spillane & Lee, 2014).

The majority of novice principals consider their most important learning for the role to be acquired while "on the job" (Clarke & Wildy, 2004) as they apply their skills and knowledge into leadership actions (Danzig, 1997). Time management, lack of policy knowledge, timely completion of paperwork, curriculum knowledge, and budget management are among many of the issues that novice principals face as they navigate in their newly acquired leadership roles (Nelson, de la Colina, & Boone, 2008). Despite the importance of principals' instructional leadership and their early career experiences as new leaders, there is little research on the challenges encountered by novice principals during the first few years of their tenure (Alvy & Coladarci, 1985). The gap is more acute regarding rural schools and rural school leadership (Alvy & Coladarci, 1985).

Much existing research on novice principals in the United States revolves around new leaders in low-performing urban school systems (Spillane & Lee, 2014). Fifty-six percent of all operating public school districts in the United States are located in rural

areas (Harmon & Schafft, 2009). Leadership in rural schools is multifaceted (Preston, Jakubiec & Kooymans, 2014), and compared to urban principals, rural principals face unique challenges (Preston et al., 2014). Rural principals wear many hats in their school buildings and the districts in which they serve (Preston et al., 2014). Spillane & Lee (2014) posited that novice principals frequently have difficulty managing and prioritizing the multiple tasks expected of them. While some leadership challenges span across all school demographic and geographic contexts, rural principals find it more difficult to network with other principals and rural principals of small schools are more isolated from leadership programs and fellow principals (Preston et al., 2014). Although some research has verified the impact and current needs of novice principals in urban settings, limited research has targeted rural principals and their unique needs and circumstances (Preston et al., 2004).

Research Questions

This paper argues for a focus on novice leadership challenges using a conceptual method to deepen and expand our understanding of how school principals enact and influence change using instructional leadership as a guide. The purpose of this study is to identify the challenges facing novice, rural principals as they strive to perform a role demanding a breadth of management and leadership responsibilities.

My study addresses two main research questions: (1) What instructional leadership concepts and actions do rural, novice principals describe as most important to their emerging practices as school leaders? (2) What are the most emergent leadership challenges that novice, rural principals identify as they transitioned into a building principal position? I investigated the early career experiences of a sample of twelve

novice, rural, public school principals in a Midwestern state within the first three years of their tenure as head principal. I was interested to know about the challenges they experience as new leaders, and also how they view their roles and responsibilities as leaders in their schools and broader communities.

Focusing on the balance between management and leadership is a crucial skill for all principals, but especially for novice principals. How principals manage and lead in the context of different environments is also critical to understanding how principals interpret and enact leadership in their schools, because the ultimate goal is to improve student achievement (Rallis & Highsmith, 1986). This study is situated within three areas of educational leadership literature, instructional leadership, novice principal leadership, and rural school leadership.

Definition of Key Terms

Rural Setting. National Center for Education Statistics as “distant rural,” or “census-defined rural territory that is more than 5 miles or less than or equal to 25 miles from an urbanized area” (NCES, 2006).

Novice Principal. One who has been employed in the role of site [building] principal in the amount of time [≤ 3 years] (Gentilucci, Denti, & Guaglianone, 2013).

Instructional Leader. Principals who engage in collaborative goal setting, distributed leadership, and crucial facilitation to propel schools forward (Brazer & Bauer, 2013).

Leadership Culture. One that builds relationships with various stakeholders, setting boundaries and establish trust (Spillane & Lee, 2014).

Instructional Leadership

When novice, rural principals enter their first principalship, they refer to their understanding of being an instructional leader in their school. According to Rallis and Highsmith (1986), principals frame their leadership via instructional leadership as a model to develop people and systems that are best for students, yet find often find their time stuck in the day-to-day managerial tasks that are associated with a typical school day.

Contrasting with the managerial tasks, instructional leadership begins when the principal chooses appropriate curriculum to improve instruction while managing school context and improve student learning (Brazer & Bauer, 2013). Principals juggle multiple roles as leaders and utilize instructional leadership (Brazer & Bauer, 2013) that guides the principal in managing these roles. Brazer & Bauer (2013) stated that instructional leadership goes beyond having students pass tests and achieve minimum standards. Instead, it requires leadership knowledge, skills, and dispositions that move the principal's school to an inquiry foundation focusing on student achievement involving a path of continuous improvement with respect to teaching and learning (Brazer & Bauer, 2013).

Instructional leadership can guide a novice, rural principal as they lead their school towards improved student achievement. The novice, rural principal must be the leader who pushes their students and staff to higher student achievement by analyzing student achievement data and making decisions to enhance the learning occurring in the classroom. Brazer & Bowers (2013) identified important leadership behaviors that essentially involve defining the school's mission, providing the necessary support to

faculty and staff to accomplish high-quality teaching, organizing the school appropriately, and managing the instructional program.

Experienced principals find themselves able to balance the role of managing the school building while being an effective instructional leader to support student achievement and create valuable and meaningful professional development (Rallis & Highsmith, 1986). Novice principals struggle with this balance as they are overwhelmed with the day-to-day managerial type activities that are associated with running a school including applying discipline, creating and managing the schedule, and responding to family needs (Spillane & Lee, 2014). Novice principals are lucky to get everything they need done in a given day and often leave the actual workplace at the end of the day to find themselves working from home later that evening (Sleegers et al., 2009). Novice principals need specific guidance as their transitions into rural school instructional leadership are challenging for experienced principals, and can potentially be even more challenging for novice principals.

Novice Principal Learning and Development

Novice principals live and work at center stage; moreover, being in the spotlight presents them a platform both to lead and to be vulnerable (Maslin-Ostrowski & Ackerman, 2000). Novice principals are at the center of all decisions and are viewed by students, staff, families, and the community when making such decisions. Spillane and Lee (2014) stated, an ultimate sense of responsibility occurs as the novice principals face a “reality shock” as they transition into their new role. The world of novice principals is filled with significant anxiety, exasperation and professional isolation (Walker & Qian, 2006); additionally, novice principals often grapple with feelings of loneliness as they transition into a role that carries the ultimate in responsibility and decision-making

powers (Spillane & Lee, 2014). It is the power and loneliness of being the final authority upon whose word the building sinks or swims that becomes so daunting (Spillane & Lee, 2014).

Novice principals face specific problems of practice depending on the nature of their transition into their new role (Lee, 2014). Novice principals refer to working on an island as they grapple with making big decisions in their school that impact students and staff (Brazier & Bauer, 2013). The novice principal must be clear about the values they are willing to go to take a stand on in their leadership role because the values of relationship building, setting boundaries, and building trust will be questioned during challenging times (Walker & Qian, 2006). The principal's values and beliefs are on the line as multiple stakeholders are watching from afar as decisions are being made that will affect them in their day-to-day job. Those observers understand the community and school culture and expect principals' decisions to fall within their cultural framework.

Creating Leadership Culture

A common challenge among principals is developing relationships with students, families, and staff, which requires setting boundaries and building trust (Nelson et al., 2008). Successful principals find themselves building relationships with students, staff, and families each day they are at school or attending school events after school hours. A strong principal who builds relationships among various stakeholders, in turn, becomes a stronger instructional leader (Brazier & Bauer, 2013).

Relationship building does have an impact on improving student achievement as the principal uses instructional leadership as a guide (Rallis & Highsmith, 1986). Moolenaar and Slegers (2015) claimed that a leadership challenge is widely regarded by

principals as playing a significant role in school improvement and educational change.

The principal's role involves many challenges including fragmentation and unforeseeability, and many different unplanned and unpredicted events which are a part of their daily life (Walker & Qian 2006).

The principal needs to foster a spirit of collaboration by communicating common goals to help with the challenges and transitions in their new role (Stronge & Jones, 1991). This is part of the culture the principal must create in their school. Principals are charged with creating a culture that promotes teacher collaboration and support for all teachers (Pogodzinski, 2015). Collaboration with teachers is important and effective leadership is extremely interpersonal, requiring working with individuals and teams to reconstruct teaching and learning (Dinham, 2005). Principals needs to create a culture that is warm, friendly and respectful for the students and staff so that students can learn at their highest potential.

Highly effective principals lead their schools with instructional leadership as the focus (Rallis & Highsmith, 1986) and have increased student achievement while creating a warm and respectful school culture (Brazer & Bauer, 2013). The instructional principal provides direction and support in order to distribute responsibility among all stakeholders (Urick & Bowers, 2014). Unique characteristics and challenges of an effective instructional leader are likely to have a set of attitudes and beliefs preferably more than a set of skills and behaviors (Rallis & Highsmith, 1986). Highly effective principals, as defined by Rigby (2014), have positive school climates, an orderly atmosphere, and high expectations for students and staff (Stronge & Jones, 1991).

The leadership role challenges principals to focus on their own personal experience, or the sensemaking experience, and finding the balance of management and leadership within the contexts of a rural setting within the novice principal leadership role. These forms of interactions are as critical as principals' work with multiple stakeholders (Lowenhaupt, 2014). According to Leithwood et al. (2004) leadership practices significantly and positively influence direct experiences for all stakeholders. Direct experiences refer to a positive impact on student achievement. Effective principals are able to balance their role using instructional leadership as their guide and are able to adapt to their environment and consider all stakeholders as they exercise their decision-making skills. As a principal leading in a rural school this can be more challenging than in an urban setting, as they are expected to fulfill multiple roles and responsibilities.

Rural School Leadership

Leading in a rural school setting creates unique challenges for novice principals. Identifying rural settings is important in this study as most of the research has been conducted in urban settings. Research highlights that rural principals commonly face specific sociopolitical and economic challenges associated with the school community (Preston et al., 2014). Rural areas have a higher proportion of low-wage with modest benefit jobs than do urban areas (Bauch, 2001). Median family incomes in rural areas in 1990 was about three fourths that of suburban areas (Herzog & Pittman, 1995). Most communities in rural America face enormous challenges and changes as rural schools are experiencing difficult tasks such as declining enrollment (Harmon & Schafft, 2009). Poverty rates are higher in rural areas, and from 1976-1986, these rates of poverty

increased twice as fast for rural areas as compared to urban areas (Bauch, 2001). Often the economic and social stratification of the rural communities are a direct impact on the rural school and are more influenced than their urban counterparts by the cultural and economic outlook of the community (Bauch, 2001). Often the rural schools serve as the cultural and social center of the town (DeYoung & Lawrence, 1995; Dunne, 1978; Herzog & Pittman, 1995). Rural schools serve as symbols of community autonomy, vitality, and identity; additionally, they are often the principal source of local employment (Harmon & Schafft, 2009). Commonly, there is a strong sense of community within rural schools, and they are firmly linked to the communities they serve (Theobald & Nachtigal, 1995).

Leadership in rural schools is multifaceted because it involves multiple layers of decision making that affects the rural community in which the principal serves, such as addressing declining student enrollment while maintaining the required core curriculum teachers (Preston et al., 2014) and compared to urban principals, rural principals face unique challenges such as making decisions without the opportunity to consult with other leaders (Preston et al., 2014). According to Harmon and Schafft (2009) rural schools function as centers of community activity and nurture public participation in civic and community affairs. Principals of schools in rural places need a clear vision or culture of a mutually beneficial, collaborative school-community building process in order to enhance student achievement (Harmon & Schafft, 2009).

Rural principals struggle (Harmon & Shafft, 2009) to understand the lack of personal privacy from the school staff and are expected by the community to skillfully relate to the rural lifestyle, live within the school community, join local organizations,

participate in local events, and act as a professional, behavioral, social, cultural, and spiritual role model (Preston et al., 2014). Rural principals are often indirectly held accountable for the welfare of the school community and well-being of teachers and students (Preston et al., 2014). The rural principal is sometimes viewed with suspicion by community members if they do not fit into the political and social context of the local community, and if they do not share social, political, historical, cultural, or ethnical familiarity with the school they lead (Preston et al., 2014).

Not only are rural principals accountable for school improvement, rural principals are seen as “public property” and “on call 24 hours a day” (Preston et al., 2014). Preston et al. (2014) stated that the rural principal plays the roles of building and student management, human resource supervision, and professional development, and accountability for student academic performance. The rural principal’s ability to thrive under emotionally charged, people-focused school community conditions is critical to leadership success (Preston et al., 2014) because it will enhance the student, staff, and parent relationships. Principals leading in a rural setting are offered a unique challenge in serving all stakeholders while being actively engaged in their community.

Statement of the Problem

Fifty-six percent of all operating public school districts in the United States are located in rural areas (Harmon & Schafft, 2009). July 1st of each year experienced public school teachers are appointed to serve as a principal and leader of a school building and are suddenly expected to know all the answers. These individuals have obtained their appropriate education and administrative certificate. Crossing over to the principal role represents a substantial shift for most newcomers, an often, abrupt change

in perspective, expectations, and work tasks for novices (Spillane & Lee, 2014). With this said, the majority of novice principals consider their most important learning for the role to be “on the job” (Clarke & Wildy, 2004). The principal provides direction and support in order to actively distribute the responsibility among all stakeholders (Urick & Bowers, 2014).

When comparing leadership in rural schools to that of urban principals, rural principals face unique challenges (Preston et al., 2014). Rural principals have responsibilities that stretch across the breadth of building management and educational leadership (Grissom, Loeb & Mitani, 2014). Rural principals wear multiple hats in their school buildings and in the districts wherein they serve (Preston et al., 2014). Most of the research revolves around new leaders in urban school systems. There is little research on the problems encountered by novice principals during the first few years of their tenure (Alvy & Coladarci, 1985). A great challenge for novice principals is to understand and create opportunities to apply their preparation skills and knowledge into actions in the new job setting (Danzig, 1997).

Purpose Statement

The phenomenological inquiry, as part of uncovering meaning, articulated essences of meaning in principals’ lived experiences as they faced various challenges when they became rural leaders. Using a lens of sensemaking perspective, the focus was on assessing principals’ unique challenges and how they transitioned into their new roles as instructional leaders. This perspective facilitated sharing common challenges that they encountered as novice, rural principals. Challenges that face novice, rural principals as they strive to perform a role demanding a breadth of management and instructional

leadership responsibilities include events as diverse as responding to parent phone calls, disciplining students, conducting walk-throughs, and building relationships with students and staff. Although research has verified the impact and current needs of principals, limited research has targeted specifically rural principals and their unique needs and circumstances (Preston et al., 2004). The impact of rural principals is profound, and they are expected to know all the answers and make decisions quickly and swiftly to keep the building moving toward continual improvement. Methods of inquiry included phenomenological reflection on data elicited by existential investigation of principals' experiences, and the investigation of the phenomenon of making sense of it all.

The current needs of rural principals must show all stakeholders that they have the instructional capacity to make sound decisions and are able to build strong relationships with students and staff to create a positive instructional environment in the school and within the community. Novice principals strive to make a positive transition as they build trusting relationships while keeping in mind an instructional leadership practice. Rural principals have multiple hats to wear as they lead in their schools (Preston et al., 2014). Rural school principals must assume roles as a classroom teacher, instructional specialist, assessment leader, parent leader, change agent, and active community volunteer (Preston et al., 2014). All of these roles add a high level of responsibility and decisions they make falls on their shoulders.

As a former principal and reflective practitioner, I gathered that in suburban and urban school districts novice principals can rely on colleagues to assist them in decision making, while the rural principal must make these decisions on their own and also be aware that the decisions they make spread rapidly in the community in which they serve.

My professional bias influences my stance that rural principals may often make decisions that will prompt other families to contact the school as word of mouth travels so quickly. The novice, rural principal must be cognizant of their leadership capability and be wise in their decision making to earn respect and create a positive learning culture for students and staff. Added to this challenge, little research has focused on the rural principal's challenges even though most settings in most states can be characterized as rural (Alvy & Coladarci, 1985). This study will share findings from 12 novice, rural principals focusing on the challenges they face in the culture they create and their depth of responsibility in and out of the school setting.

Significance of the Study

Developing the capacity of their schools to provide successful educational experiences for all students is an ongoing professional challenge for on-site principals (Lee, 1991). Rural community members possess a strong sense of belonging, pride, and appreciation for their community. Because the culture of the rural schools reflects the characteristics of the immediate community, the concept of change is often a controversial issue for rural principals (Preston et al., 2014). Limited research has focused on novice principals in rural school districts, and specifically limited research on the multiple roles they must play in a smaller school environment. Information learned by current novice, rural principals can benefit those in getting professional support through transition into a building principal when tackling a variety of administrative tasks and responsibilities.

Educational stakeholders need to understand the unique situation faced by the rural principal in order to promote effective leadership policies, practices, and programs

within rural contexts (Preston et al., 2014). It has been determined that principals' practices are an influential factor contributing to levels of positive school climates associated with student learning (Rigby, 2014). Current expectations require principals to help improve teaching and learning, to keep pace with progressively higher benchmarks for school performance, and achieve at least minimally satisfactory results on state assessments for all children (Brazier & Bauer, 2013). Instructional leadership can influence student learning by creating conditions that enable more effective teaching among individual teachers (Heck & Hallinger, 2014). This study will contribute value to the research that allows for future school principals a positive transition into their new role when being an instructional leader in a rural public school.

Methodology

I utilized semi-structured interviewing as part of a phenomenological, qualitative study design (Creswell, 2013). I will report on a total of 12 novice, public school principals who are working in rural settings in a Midwestern state in the United States. As a phenomenological study, I position myself, recognizing that I could not completely remove myself from the situation. In this study, the novice, rural, public school principals described their meaning through their lived experiences. Creswell (2013) described this as a phenomenon. I interviewed the participants in their natural setting sharing their experience at the site where they experience the issue or problem under study (Creswell, 2013). The qualitative information was gathered by actually talking directly to the principals and asking them how they behave and act within their school environment (Creswell, 2013). As a phenomenologist, I assume that human experience makes sense to those who live it and that human experience can be consciously expressed

(Creswell, 2013). Drawing from their various disciplines, the novice school principals shared their experiences and make sense of their meaning of the information and describing the essence of their experience and this idea is well grounded and well supported in a phenomenology. I used data collection to construct criteria to locate and select participants, develop questions to guide face-to-face, one-hour interviews, provide information to participants regarding the nature and purpose of the research, establishment of an agreement that includes informed consent, and conduct lengthy interviews with participants that focus on a specific experience as the novice, rural principal. The phenomenology turns on the lived experiences of the participants and how they have both subjective experiences of the phenomenon and the objective experiences of something in common with other people.

The organization and analysis of data was reviewed and coded. Interviews occurred in the novice principals' setting and were audio recorded. An interview protocol was used with guidance of 25 questions to ask. Additional clarification of answers occurred during the interviews. Transcription of audio recordings of the interviews used Rev, an online transcription company. Each transcript was read and studied in its entirety and open coding occurred using the literature reviewed as a guide. I developed a cluster of meaning from the interview statements and placed data into themes (Creswell, 2013). The coding was divided into themes that represented the words of the participants. Code statements were relevant to the research topic and questions with simple language, and developed textural descriptions of participants' perspectives and experiences from thematically organized meaning units. All coding used

pseudonyms to keep the names of the novice principals confidential so as to maintain the participants' anonymity.

Participants did not receive compensation to partake in this study. Documents and artifacts were not used in this study, but instead constructed its findings on the novice principals' views and perceptions of how they perceive themselves as operating in their new role as principal. Member checking was conducted by the participants after the coding had occurred and quotes had been documented. The participants reviewed their recorded interviews in written form thus making my completed analysis valid and reliable.

Summary

This chapter provided an overview of this study of the challenges novice, rural principals face as they strive to perform a role demanding a breadth of management and instructional leadership responsibilities. The study sought to address novice, rural school principals who must assume roles as a classroom teacher supervisor, instructional specialist, assessment leader, parent leader, change agent, and active community volunteer. Designed as a phenomenology, the research explored the sensemaking experience of novice principals as individuals in a rural setting as well as the ways principals lead others in sensemaking. Additionally, the study addressed the experience of novice, rural principals using instructional leadership derived from previous research underlying the essence of their experiences in this phenomenology.

The following chapter will provide a more detailed discussion of the literature reviewed for this study. Previous research regarding instructional leadership, novice

principals, principal culture, and rural settings specifically is presented. The chapter also presents the conceptual framework guiding this study.

CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this literature review is to inform this study of novice, rural principals' sensemaking processes and their emergent leadership challenges, including balancing between leadership and managerial work. This review first broadly highlights the concept of novice and rural principals. It then provides an overview of how principals position themselves within instructional leadership. The literature review concludes with the researcher's conceptual framework for novice, rural principals guided by instructional leadership within the principal's culture.

Novice, rural principals face a steep learning curve as they enter into their new profession. This study explores the sensemaking processes of novice, rural principals who are learning the effective strategies and the balance between leadership (cultural, relational, and collaborative) and managerial "survival mode."

The literature review for this study was informed by a critical review of prior research on novice and rural principals and instructional leadership. The major works of theorists and researchers in the field of organizational learning were reviewed. The literature review of primary and secondary sources was conducted using electronic searches. Extensive use of electronic literature databases, including Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC), Google Scholar, Journal Storage (JSTOR), and ProQuest, informed the search. The following major descriptors were used in electronic searches: (a) *novice principals*, (b) *instructional leadership*, (c) *leadership*, (d) *organizational learning*, (e) *sensemaking*, (f) *rural principals*, (g) *collaboration*, (h) *rural leadership*, and (i) *culture*.

Instructional Leadership

The positive effects of strong instructional leadership are evident in the research literature. Principals hold the most important role, have more responsibility for the success of students, and are the first accountable individuals to play a key role for change and student achievement in schools (Bayer, 2016). According to Brazer and Bauer (2013), instructional leadership is pivotal to an aspiring principal's ability to lead school improvement. A meta-analysis of 35 years of educational research found a statistically significant relationship between the principal's leadership effectiveness and student achievement (Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005).

Leadership practices significantly and positively influence direct experiences for all stakeholders, especially relationship building, communication, mediation, and foundations of principals' practices (Leithwood et al., 2004; Lowenhaupt, 2014). Heck and Hallinger (2014) indicated that instructional leadership is impactful on instruction, which, in turn, is impactful on student learning, and that leadership can influence student learning by creating conditions that enable more effective teaching among individuals. Findings have shown that school principals can play a key role in changing teachers' instructional practices and fostering teachers' learning by creating collaborative workplace conditions and giving support (Slegers, Wassink, van Veen, & Imants, 2016).

School leaders need to be innovative and produce evidence-based practice in their buildings. Principals have been acknowledged for involvement in leadership challenges such as redesigning schools, mentoring teachers, and problem-solving at the school level (Danielson, 2006). Leadership challenges move beyond a recognition of leadership tied to instruction. As a result, three models emerge: a broad, flexible instructional leader

without specific goals or direction; a social justice inspiring principal; and an entrepreneurial principal who relies on data and a thorough action plan (Dinham, 2005). A principal who has strengths in all of these areas will improve the atmosphere in the building in which they lead and ultimately improve student achievement.

In shared instructional leadership, or parallel leadership, there is a recognized assumption by scholars that leadership is undertaken by many within a school (Andrews & Crowther, 2002; Donaldson, 2006; Harris, 2003b; Lambert, 2002; Printy & Marks, 2003; Spillane et al., 2001). Well-prepared instructional leaders are able to read the local context to understand the waves of reform, the nature of teachers resistance to change, and the potential that exists in the tendency for teachers to hybridize reforms and to make decisions accordingly (Brazer & Bauer, 2013), which all ties into the challenges that novice, rural principals face.

Effective school leadership thus can involve a combination of leadership models (Printy & Marks, 2006) with multiple roles and functions (Elmore, 2000), which shares the emerging leadership practices novice, rural principals face. Leadership can be practiced by multiple individuals across the domains of policy, professional, system, school, and practice. In this manner, Leithwood and Riehl (2005) proposed that leadership is “the work of mobilizing and influencing others to articulate and achieve the school’s shared intentions and goals” (p. 14).

Among the many tasks and responsibilities principals perform on a daily basis, collaborative instructional leadership has shown to be one of the most important facets of principals’ work (Marks & Printy, 2003; Robinson et al., 2008). Allowing opportunities for teachers to collaborate in the school setting, and through gathering data to ultimately

improve student achievement, are among the challenges novice, rural principals face. The characteristics of instructional leaders have matured into application by principals and others who engage in collaborative goal setting, distributed leadership, and crucial facilitation to propel schools forward (Brazer & Bauer, 2013). To address the challenges of novice, rural principals, the power of shared leadership and collaborative learning, fosters group identity, builds mutual trust, and strengthens social ties.

The school district's collaborative leadership approach directly correlates with the effectiveness of the school relationships. Principals who have many close ties with teachers in their schools may also have more information to share in collaboration with other principals in their district (Moolenaar & Slegers, 2015). Additionally, the principal is increasing professional aptitude to work through their challenges by way of promoting continuous improvement via deliberately focusing on quality of staff to enhance professional capacity (Bryk et al., 2010). School administrators with direct, positive approaches can enhance their practices and create school-wide capacity for improvement. School leaders need to be innovative and produce evidence-based practices in their buildings in order to work through challenges and transition successfully.

Leadership challenges can require knowledge of instructional practices, an ability to communicate well, and the capacity to build trust and respect amongst colleagues. The role of the principal in shaping the culture with respect to school change and reform illustrates the way in which principals can influence school culture for instructional improvement (Lee, 1991). Hallinger (2003) claimed that instructional leadership involves defining the school's mission, managing instructional programs, and promoting school

climate, while Strong and Jones (1991) stated that highly effective principals have positive school climates, orderly atmosphere, and high expectations for students and staff. Teachers are unlikely to trust leaders who either avoid dealing with difficult issues or who deal with them ineffectively (LeFevre & Robinson, 2013).

Hallinger (2003) observed that managing instructional programs requires leadership that is deeply engaged in supervising instruction, coordinating curriculum, and monitoring student progress. Instructional leadership also includes the function of promoting professional development. Principals may practice instructional leadership as they employ their expertise in instructional practices by engaging in instructional coaching, providing opportunities for professional learning and growth, and participating in collaborative inquiry (Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2009). The instructional leader assists staff in establishing and clarifying short- and long-range goals and making sure they are reasonable and attainable (Hallinger & Murphy, 2007). The principal of the school must help the teachers break their learning into different parts; thereby, allowing for them to ultimately meet the end result to improve student achievement. Instructional leaders will understand that improvement evolves and responds to pressure—both to make change and to resist it (Brazer & Bauer, 2013). The relationship aspects of principals' practices should merge with managerial aspects of principals' school leadership.

I reviewed studies that specifically addressed the question of how principals balanced their role of leadership and management to help address the challenges to a successful transition. Principals assume a multifaceted job that includes overlapping instructional and managerial roles (Spillane & Lee, 2014). Increased time on instructional leadership has been a commonly expressed aspiration of principals (LeFevre

& Robinson, 2015). Current expectations require principals to help improve teaching and learning to keep pace with progressively higher benchmarks for school performance and achieve at least minimally satisfactory results on state assessments for all children (Brazier & Bauer, 2013).

Walker and Qian (2006) found that the main reasons for becoming a principal is to develop their career, having a chance to implement personal vision, and to create opportunities for school improvement; nonetheless, Wildy and Clarke (2008) and Spillane and Lee (2014) shared that the volume and unpredictability of management tasks emerge early for novice principals. Nelson et al. (2008) stated that effective programs place instructional leadership at the center of school improvement, yet, they found how challenging it really is to practice instructional leadership. Alvy and Coladarci (1985) found that the four most difficult duties of instructional leadership are: (a) finding time to visit classrooms to help teachers to improve instruction, (b) strengthening the school instructional program, (c) advocating the use of current educational findings, and (d) encouraging teachers to provide instructional programs to meet individual student needs.

According to Nelson et al. (2008), principals identify a lack of understanding in one or more discrete knowledge and skill areas such as special education, law, or curriculum. Time management, lack of policy knowledge, timely completion of paperwork, curriculum knowledge, student misbehavior, and budget management are among the issues principals identify, as put forth by Nelson et al. (2008). Walker and Qian (2006) have shown that being a principal nowadays means being continually confronted with disconnected demands, with expectations of a very different nature

linked to different aspects of the daily operation of a school, and with conflicting demands of several external constituencies. Novice principals are often frustrated by the large volume of administrative tasks, which limits their ability to get inside classrooms and perform the duties that are expected of them as instructional leaders (Spillane & Lee, 2014).

Balance Between Leadership and Management

In this study, I defined leadership as promoting school effectiveness, supporting school improvement, curriculum development, and classroom instructional practices (Lee, 1991). In this study, I defined management as the day-to-day tasks required to run the operation of a school (Brazer & Bauer, 2013). Examples are, but not limited to, finding substitute teachers, hiring staff, responding to parent phone calls, student discipline, facility management, and crisis management issues. Developing the capacity of their schools to provide successful educational experiences for all students is an ongoing professional challenge for principals (Lee, 1991).

Hiring teachers with high potential, providing the professional development they need, and moving out those who cannot, or will not, develop are critical management behaviors that define instructional leadership (Brazer & Bauer, 2013). According to Brazer and Bauer (2013) management skills can greatly enhance school improvement efforts, however, they must be integrated into graduate instruction that has instructional leadership as its ultimate goal.

Recent reviews of instructional leadership suggest that while principals must organize day-to-day managerial duties, further development is needed around the specifics of what instructional leadership should look like in practice (Rigby, 2014).

Hallinger (2003) claimed that instructional leadership involves several defining functions, including the enactment of the school's mission, managerial instructional programs, and promoting school climate. In addition, Hallinger asserted that principals' management of instructional programs requires leadership that is deeply engaged in supervising instruction, coordinating curriculum, promoting professional development, and monitoring student progress. Effective school leadership thus can involve a combination of leadership models with multiple roles and functions (Elmore, 2000).

Regardless of formally defined roles, these varied models frame leadership as rooted in distributed expertise, mutual dependence, reciprocity of accountability and capacity, and instructional practice (Elmore, 2000; Hallinger & Heck, 2010; Harris, 2003; Lambert, 2002). Nelson, and colleagues (2008) simply stated that being a principal is a work in progress that is never completed. Working with teachers to achieve improved instructional outcomes is an important element of the principal's work in addressing the challenge of developing capacity in their schools (Lee, 1991). Crucial to principals' holistic leadership is building a positive professional culture that is rooted in building relationships, collaboration, and trust.

I reviewed studies that specifically addressed the question of how principals create leadership culture because creating a positive leadership culture will minimize challenges to increase a successful transition for the novice, rural principal (Lee, 1991).

Creating Leadership Culture

In this study, I have defined leadership culture as shaping the meanings that school staff give to their work; specifically having staff examine, on their own, knowledge, theories, beliefs, experiences, and values to be more reflective practitioners

(Spillane & Lee, 2014). In this study, I have chosen to use the work of Lee (1991) and Rallis and Highsmith (1986) because they share the meaning of improving individual and collective capacity to improve the quality of work, while maintaining a positive school culture. Specifically, I am identifying and crafting my study on the rurality of the setting, and advancing why my ideas apply to rural places as unique environments for leadership. Harmon and Schafft (2009), have shown that rural school leadership provides a setting for collaborative community development, and identified that educational leaders may develop personal identities connected to their rural place in creating the school culture. Developing a school culture and instructional program conducive to student learning and staff professional growth, while maintaining the value of the quality of rural-life ways to build leadership characteristics consistent with the mentality of the small rural community is a challenge for rural principals (Harmon & Schafft, 2009).

For example, Lee (1991) shared that principals can provide encouragement to support staff in articulating their thinking about their work with students—the sense they make of instructional issues, strategies, challenges, successes, and failures—as a means of improving their individual and collective capacity to improve their work. In addition, principals can find ways for every student to feel successful and for staff to receive appropriate recognition (Dinham, 2005). Changes brought in by the novice principal are often resisted because school members feel that their new way of life is being challenged (Spillane & Lee, 2014).

A principal must be visible, making sure that the culture of the school does not clash with the culture of the community (Rallis & Highsmith, 2015). Principals play key roles in providing the conditions where teachers can operate effectively and students can

learn (Dinham, 2005). Lee (1991) suggested principals provide structures or opportunities for activities to help create a supportive climate and culture. The principal should create regular opportunities for staff to engage in conversations about their work, focus on the ways they interpret events, and explore how their interpretations influence instruction (Lee, 1991).

Highly effective principals have positive school climates, orderly atmosphere, and high expectations for students and staff (Stronge & Jones, 1991). The principal provides direction and support in order to actively distribute the responsibility among all stakeholders (Urick & Bowers, 2014). The role of the principal in shaping the culture with respect to school change and reform illustrates the way in which principals can influence school culture for instructional improvement (Lee, 1991).

According to Leithwood et al. (2004), leadership practices significantly and positively influence direct experiences for all stakeholders. The leadership role challenges principals to focus on relationship building, communication, and mediation as foundations of principal practice. These forms of interaction are critical components of principals' work with multiple stakeholders (Lowenhaupt, 2014).

Effective leadership is intensely interpersonal, raising the important role principals hold in establishing relationships built on collaboration, commitment, and trust (Thessin & Clayton, 2012). It is their personality, as well as their informal and formal behavior, that sets the tone of the climate for the building (Trump, 1981). The level of confidence in leadership skills becomes increasingly important as the role of the principal continues to become more complex and demanding (Airola et al., 2014). According to Loy and Boon (1998), the most effective principals are likely to be those who

demonstrate a strong inclination toward leadership, instructional leadership, thrust, work emphasis, consideration, and adaptability.

Principals are expected and challenged by various stakeholders to have a clear understanding of their role, including how to maneuver power appropriately, maintain professional relationships, and design exercises to facilitate student achievement (Walker & Qian, 2006). According to McCarthy (2015), effective school leadership positively influences student learning and school improvement, and the way in which leaders are prepared allows this to happen. Stone-Johnson (2014) suggested that successful leadership means both taking responsibility for learning when it is successful and assuming responsibility when it does not go as intended.

School contexts are changing rapidly with implications for the complexity of principals' work including accountability, strong interpersonal skills, high levels of visibility and professional isolation (Wildy & Clark, 2008). Airola et al. (2014) shared that the principal role has resulted in an increase of responsibility, driven by accountability mandates, that has made school leadership one of the most complex and challenging positions in education today.

Principals play active policy-defining roles in negotiating federal regulations and local initiatives as well as performing assessment and accountability mandates (Koyama, 2014). Challenges principals face include: (a) participating in various key decisions in their schools, (b) allocation of resources, (c) implementation and execution of plans, and (d) evaluation of outcomes (Klein, 2002). In this era of increasing accountability, a calling and challenge has been put into place for additional and stronger sources of instructional leadership (Hausman et al., 2001).

This expectation of the novice principal to be an instructional leader is heightened for those principals choosing to work in a rural setting (Preston et al., 2014). Rural principals find themselves feeling alone and as if they are the sole person to make all decisions. In addition, principals serving in rural schools find themselves serving the community in a different capacity. They are expected to be seen as a leader in the entire community.

I have discussed recent literature about the novice principal development leadership experiences. I reviewed studies that specifically addressed the question of how novice principals transition to their leadership role.

Novice Principal Learning and Development

According to research, the main challenges that novice principals face are creating culture, building relationships, and being an instructional leader. These are related to instructional leadership because the ultimate role of a principal is to lead their school instructionally.

In this study, I have defined the term novice as a head principal within their first three years of service. Alvy and Coladarci (1985), Danzig (1997), and Nelson et al. (2008) defined novice principals in their first few years in their role. It is not surprising that principals new to their job inevitably feel clumsy, unsure of themselves, and need help in how to think about the problems of practice (Danzig, 1997). Crossing over into the principal's office represents a sizable shift for most novices, a distinct and often abrupt change in perspective, expectations, and work tasks (Spillane & Lee, 2014). Social relationships between principals and teachers change; moreover, changing roles among colleagues in schools, specifically not adapting to new roles, may negatively

affect school culture (Bayer, 2016). Consequently, novice principals frequently fight with feelings of professional isolation and loneliness in the workplace (Bayer, 2016).

Daresh and Playko (1994) shared that the administrative entry year is marked by considerable anxiety, frustration, and self-doubt. Novice principals are often frustrated by the large volume of administrative tasks, which limits their ability to get inside classrooms and perform the duties that are expected of them as instructional leaders (Spillane & Lee, 2014). In addition, administrators experience considerable frustration over the fact that they did not understand the nature of leadership responsibilities before they acquired the hot seat (Daresh & Playko, 1994).

According to Alvy and Coladarci (1985), novice principals indicate that their most difficult area of responsibility is curriculum and instruction. Nelson et al. (2008) and Walker and Qian (2006) found that novice principals have the challenge of negotiating relationships, particularly when a conflict is at the center of a relationship. The benefit of having positive relationships throughout the school community is very important to the novice principal (Nelson et al., 2008). Ineffective and resistant staff members also pose significant challenges for novice principals (Spillane & Lee, 2014). For the education staff to trust an effective, novice principal, he or she must be visionary; they must be able to see and communicate hope, and to transform ideas into goals that can be shared by everyone in the school (Rallis & Highsmith, 1986).

As novice principals strive for open communication and collaboration, they face a critical expectation of increased school accountability (Fink & Silverman, 2014). For new leaders, Spillane and Lee (2014) shared that novice principals are often frustrated by

the large volume of administrative tasks, which limits their ability to get inside the classrooms and perform the duties that are expected of them as instructional leaders.

Lee (2015) stated that the novice principal needs to prioritize formal information-gathering channels and be willing to rely on those at the start of their tenure. Novice principals are often struck by how taking on the official title immediately results in staff members being more cautious and distant with them (Spillane & Lee, 2014). Because staff resistance is one of the most difficult obstacles for novice principals to overcome, using a team approach and data for making decisions will help keep the transition as smooth as possible (Lee, 2015).

Spillane and Lee (2014) found that novice principals frequently have difficulty managing and prioritizing the multiple tasks expected of them, and then they find ineffective and resistant staff members who also pose significant challenges. Addressing issues of time management, lack of policy knowledge, timely completion of paperwork, developing curriculum knowledge, and learning budget management are among many of the issues that novice principals face as they navigate their new leadership role in working with staff members (Nelson et al., 2008). Spillane and Lee (2014) have found that high levels of stress and pressure manifest in novice principals and causes problems such as sleep deprivation, physical exhaustion, frustration, nervousness, and constant worrying.

Alvy and Coladarci, (1985) put forth that novice principals find their most difficult responsibility is curriculum and instruction. In addition, Nelson et al. (2008) found that novice principals identify a lack of understanding in one or more discrete knowledge and skill areas such as special education law. Another common challenge is

discipline, which is an immediate management responsibility of novice principals (Nelson et al., 2008). All of these challenges impact the novice principals' ability to find the time and organization to be an instructional leader.

A good relationship between the novice principal and their superintendent and a smoothly functioning administrative team can significantly impact novice principal success, not just to the individuals involved, but to the school as a whole (Hausman, 2002). Cowie and Crawford (2008) reported that new principals do not feel well prepared for the principalship despite the programming and training they received; therefore, a mentoring relationship with the superintendent is valuable in guiding the new principal. The on-the-job training principals' experience is found to be the most effective training. Clarke and Wildy (2004) expressed the prevalence of the role of learning on the job by principals, and argue that principals need to be reflective learners who can work out independently how to deal with the problems, issues, and challenges they encounter in their work.

There has been little attention directed toward the identification of skills presumed to be important from aspiring school principals (Daresh & Playko, 1994). In order to determine the impact of principal leadership it is important to make sense of beginning principals' background and experience in terms of motivation and preparation, what they are expected to do, what they actually do, how effective they are, the problems they face, how to support them professionally and emotionally, and how to continue ongoing improvement (Walker & Qian, 2006).

Daresh and Playko (1994), and Hansford and Ehrich (2006), respectively, agreed it is important for novice principals to demonstrate skills in the areas of self-awareness

and socialization, both of which contribute to one's ability to serve as a principal, thus effectively allowing for principal self-reflective practices. The development of process skills are viewed as more critical than learning about traditional managerial skills for novice school principals (Daresh & Playko, 1994). Gentilucci et al. (2013) found that novice principals lack managerial training as a significant challenge of their work. The challenges most problematic for novice principals centered on soft skills that include stress management, personal organization, relationship building, communication, networking, and surviving at the center of complex organizational dynamics (Gentilucci et al., 2013). Such mentoring should focus on the needs and feelings of the novice principal as he or she carries through the first year or two of service as a school leader (Daresh & Playko, 1994). Hansford and Ehrich (2006) suggested that mentoring programs are an important type of professional development activity for enhancing the learning and growth potential of novice principals. Furthermore, there are implications for the refinement of practices associated with induction programs for novice principals as well as ongoing professional development (Daresh & Playko, 1994). The value of these induction programs become more evident as one looks deeper into the rural principal setting.

Rural School Leadership

In this study, I define rural utilizing the National Center for Education Statistics as “distant rural,” or “census-defined rural territory that is more than 5 miles or less than or equal to 25 miles from an urbanized area” (NCES, 2006).

According to Harmon and Schafft (2009), 56 percent of all operating public school districts in the United States are defined as located in rural areas. As an example,

in Iowa there are 334 public school districts educating roughly 502,964 students (Iowa Department of Education). Of the 334 public school districts, eighty-nine percent or 304 of the public school districts are in a rural setting (Iowa Department of Education, 2015).

There is limited research that has targeted rural principals and their unique needs and circumstances (Preston et al., 2014). Alvy and Coladarci (1985) shared that little research has focused on the rural principalship, even though most principalship settings can be characterized as being rural. Harmon and Schafft (2009) and Clarke and Wildy (2004) concurred that most communities in rural America are in flux and face enormous challenges; furthermore, these challenges may be heightened because young principals lack the maturity for dealing with the complex social issues that often characterize small rural communities. On average, rural schools have smaller enrollments than do suburban schools (Stern, 1994). Rural residents commonly achieve lower formal levels of education than urban residents (Bauch, 2001). In 1990, high school completion rates were 7.8 percent lower in rural areas, whereas 9.5 percent more of the metropolitan had completed college (Herzog & Pittman, 1995). Youth attending school in a rural setting are less likely to take college preparatory classes and attend college than their urban counterparts (Greenberg, 1995). Many rural residents socially strongly identify with their place of residence and are reluctant leaving to pursue higher education or careers (DeYoung, 1995; Seal & Harmon, 1995). Research highlighted that rural principals commonly face specific social/cultural and economic challenges associated with the school community (Preston et al., 2014). Former ties to the community were linked to the success of the rural principal because they have a greater understanding of, and a deeper appreciation for, the values, priorities, and culture of the community (Preston et

al, 2014). Rural residents are often less mobile than their urban counterparts and feel more attached to their place of residency (Bauch, 2001).

Moreover, school and district leaders who encourage the use of rural school facilities for community functions (e.g. voting precinct, community organization's fundraisers) demonstrate an understanding of the local rural culture in ways that influence positive school-community collaboration and community development (Harmon & Schaft, 2009). Social capital between school and community is maintained and strengthened by cultivating a strong sense of place, providing opportunities for parent involvement, and using the community as a resource (Bauch, 2001). Often rural families have deep roots in a community, thick relational networks, and strong intergenerational closure that serve to reinforce community norms, attitudes and values (Bauch, 2001).

According to Preston et al. (2014), exceedingly high expectations are placed upon the rural school principal from parent and community members. Rural community members possess a strong sense of belonging, pride, and appreciation for their community. Because the culture of the rural schools reflects the characteristics of the immediate community, the concept of change is often a controversial issue for rural principals (Preston et al., 2014). Rural communities are often tightly knit, take pride in their sense of place, and provide social investments for their children (Bauch, 2001). Due to the rural school size, principals note that they have an opportunity for enhanced knowledge of students, leading to greater individualization, attention to student learning, and assessment of needs (Renihan & Noonan, 2016). Rural communities benefit from the insight and enthusiasm that students can bring to local issues while gaining a sense of place and belonging (Bauch, 2001). Kearney (1994) shared that small schools tend to

create and sustain a positive school climate, orderly environment, a high level of student-faculty engagement, and better school-community relationships.

Principals may develop personal identities connected to a rural place, come to personally value the quality of rural-life ways, and build individual leadership characteristics consistent with the mentality of a small rural community (Harmon & Schafft, 2009). Bauch (2001) learned from her research that a rural principal connected with the local businesses when they needed anything and that the principal enjoyed a high level of prestige in the community by doing so. Renihan and Noonan (2016) shared that rural principals have more intimate, familial professional cohorts that present greater opportunities for the creation of collaborative professional cultures within the school, focused on teaching strategies, assessment literacy, and school-wide, data-driven decision-making. The pressure is high for novice principals to immediately excel in rural settings (Clarke & Wildy, 2004). This is a challenge when there are specific problems of practice noted, a lack of research in this area to guide novice principal development; additionally, many novice, rural principals feel their preparation for the breadth of responsibility is weak (Harmon & Schafft, 2009). Because leadership in rural schools cannot be removed from the historical and social practices of the immediate community, rural principals must be able to navigate and arbitrate relationships within the local community and school system (Preston et al., 2014).

Since it is more challenging to attract highly qualified candidates for teaching positions in rural settings, the rural principal has a great influence on retaining rural teachers; consequently, in many ways, the recruitment and retention of quality rural teachers is intricately dependent upon the rural principal, their leadership style, and their

relationships with staff members (Preston et al., 2014). Preston et al. (2014) stated that the challenge of working with adults in small, rural communities is the likelihood that teachers are colleagues as well as parents, members of the school community, and the community as a whole. In addition, teacher behavior is more scrutinized in rural districts, making teachers powerless to community pressures (Nachtigal, 1982). As the culture of the rural schools reflects the characteristics of the immediate community, the concept of change is often a controversial issue for rural principals (Preston et al., 2014). The schools function as the center of community life through their activities; moreover, they nurture public participation in civic and community affairs (Harmon & Schafft, 2009).

Educational stakeholders need to understand the unique situation faced by the rural principal in order to promote effective leadership policies, practices, and programs within rural contexts (Preston et al., 2014). Clarke and Wildy (2004) illuminated the perception that principals of rural schools have of their leadership, the contextual factors that shape their understanding, and the strategies they use to deal with the complexity of their work. Rural context principals spend considerable time and energy on administrative issues and less time on such specific leadership functions as assessment leadership (Renihan & Noonan, 2016).

For principals in rural schools, the superintendent and school board establish the goals, but the professional development planning and implementation falls on their shoulders. It takes a considerable amount of time for school leaders to develop their capacity for communication, collaboration, teamwork, and resilience (Bredeson, 2000). Rural principals emphasize the importance of knowing what is happening in their classrooms, and having the big picture concerning assessment practices in their buildings

(Renihan & Noonan, 2016). School leaders need to be equipped with the breadth of modern experience and applicable skills, so they can tackle the challenges and complexities inherent to their leadership roles (Preston et al., 2014).

A one-size-fits-all preparation program for school principals is not adequate for serving schools and their communities in rural settings (Harmon & Schafft, 2009).

Additional research called attention to the fact that particular topics need to be threaded into professional development for rural principals, including mutually beneficial school-community partnerships and relations, financial management for rural schools, and mentorship for rural principals (Preston et al., 2014). Mentoring in rural school districts found four essential topics recognized as needed by principals: professional and organizational socialization, instructional leadership, use of data for informed decision making, and working with difficult staff (Duncan & Stock, 2010). Harmon and Schafft (2004) contributed that each rural community and its schools must share a responsibility and take collaborative actions that build community and strengthen positive results for all students to be successful. Rural principals who recognize and support the intimate school-community bond are more likely to be successful (Preston et al., 2014).

According to the research presented, effective principals are those that demonstrate a strong inclination towards leadership, instructional leadership, drive, work emphasis, consideration and adaptability to their community that they serve. Effective leadership is intensely interpersonal establishing strong relationships of collaboration and trust with their staff. Through this, the novice, rural principal sets the tone of the building climate.

The principal is also expected to clearly understand the community in which they serve. They must make sense of their community, and how it impacts their role as an instructional leader. To demonstrate this, I chose to use sensemaking as a theoretical perspective because I wanted to know how the novice principals interviewed in my study made sense of their role as they served in a rural school and community. Rural principals need to make sense of their surroundings, and how their leadership impacts the organizational culture in the rural setting.

Sensemaking as a Theoretical Perspective

The sense that any principal makes of his or her work—the meanings and interpretations that comprise the starting points for choosing one’s course of action—is a function of many complex variables including past experiences, beliefs, values, training, knowledge, and present context (Lee, 1991). A sensemaking framework applied in my study identifies that individuals engage in complex cognitive processes when presented with the challenge of running a school as a principal; likewise, sensemaking is seen as an active process of constructing meaning from present stimuli interceded by prior knowledge and rooted in the social context (Sleegers et al., 2016). Sensemaking used in qualitative research enhances the shared beliefs of the common interests of the participants, and underscores the way in which they perceive phenomena (Weick, 1995). Seeing what one believes and not seeing that for which one has no beliefs are central to sensemaking, thus the use of qualitative research to interview individuals with open-ended research questions is essential (Weick, 1995).

As a result of a variety of social, political, and economic developments, school principals have been confronted with an increasingly intricate set of different demands and problems, often with strong moral connotations (Sleegers et al., 2016). The

principals use a blend of their experiences, beliefs, contexts of their organization, and exploration of their resources in a rural setting. Formal leaders interpret reform demands and translate them into school practices through a process of sensemaking (Ganon-Shilon & Schechter, 2016). Sensemaking shapes strategic choices and influences school leadership practices (Sleegers et al., 2016).

Sensemaking can be viewed as a recurring cycle comprised of a sequence of events over a period of time (Weick, 1995). The sensemaking framework first identifies that individuals engage in a complex cognitive process when presented with a new leadership opportunity. Individuals actively construct meaning—or make sense of something—by relating new information to pre-existing cognitive frameworks, labeled by scholars as working knowledge (Sleegers et al., 2016). Spillane et al. (2002) explained that sensemaking is more than interpretation. Rather, sensemaking includes a process of applying an individual's prior knowledge to frame and connect new ideas to current understandings. Information can be interpreted differently or misunderstood during implementation as information is assimilated with previous understandings, values, emotions, and motivations.

Sensemaking during leadership opportunities also occurs in a social context when action is taken. A principal at work is one who gives others a different sense of meaning of that which they do by recreating it in a different form, in a different way of seeing things (Weick, 1995). Sensemaking is about an activity or a process. Principals need to learn about how their own characteristics, attributes, knowledge, and ways of thinking are played out in their day-to-day activities and interactions, and how the sense they make of their work shapes their own behaviors (Lee, 1991). According to Spillane et al. (2002),

context includes everything from organizational identities to the structure of organizations where leadership opportunities are implemented and action is taken. Professional affiliations, social networks, and familial traditions all are encompassed in the social context where sensemaking occurs (Brown & Duguid 1991; Lave & Wenger, 1991).

Social interactions in the implementation context can shape sensemaking and resulting implementation in leadership. Policy signals are the final component of a sensemaking implementation framework (Spillane et al., 2002). Principals can actively and directly shape the sense that their staff makes of their work (Lee, 1991). The actions of the principal will always contribute to the sense that others in the school make of their own work (Lee, 1991). Sensemaking is what it says it is, namely, making something sensible (Weick, 1995).

I theoretically framed this analysis of novice, rural principals' accounts of their leadership for learning activities as socially-constructed *sensemaking* phenomena (Sleegers et al., 2009; Spillane & Lee, 2014; Weick, 1995). Sensemaking posits that individuals continuously construct meaning from their personal histories, professional experiences, and beliefs within the situational contexts of their work with others (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Weick, 1995). This study analyzes principals' responses as reflective snapshots of their past actions and how they narrated their thoughts, beliefs, and priorities regarding their leadership for learning actions intended to improve their schools (Weick, 1995).

In the literature review, rural schools are unique, their communities require a particular leadership approach; therefore, a framework that addresses context is

appropriate here. Following the theoretical applications of sensemaking presented by Slegers et al. (2009) and Spillane and Lee (2014), I applied sensemaking to understand how the principals in this study narrate their practices in the context of rural school communities and their professional experiences. In their study, Slegers et al. (2006) investigated the sensemaking of two novice secondary principals in the Netherlands and how they managed difficult situations in their first years as school leaders. To determine the most pressing concerns among principals who were new to the position, Spillane and Lee (2014) conducted a mixed-methods study of seventeen novice principals who commenced new careers after completing their principal preparation program. In both studies, researchers aimed to understand how novice principals interpreted the needs of their school communities in context, while consciously thinking about their own positionality in the midst of emerging challenges, opportunities, and aspirations as new leaders.

This study builds on the work of the Slegers and Spillane studies on sensemaking by using their framework to align with my own work; thereby, getting the sense of novice, rural principals and how they have transitioned into their new roles. In her study, Lee (1991) stated that principals who consider the supervision of instruction as a cluster of activities in the sensemaking process increased the capacity of their schools to succeed with regard to all students. Spillane and Lee (2014) stated that sensemaking is also influenced by situations—not only giving cues extracted from situations but also the sense that others give via their expectations and local interpretations. Sensemaking is seen as an active process of constructing meaning from present stimuli mediated by prior knowledge and embedded in the social context (Slegers et al., 2016). The sensemaking

process is a cognitive process that is both individual and collective (Spillane et al., 2006). Spillane et al. (2002) explained that sensemaking is more than interpretation. Rather, sensemaking includes a process of applying an individual's prior knowledge to frame and connect new ideas to current understandings (Kim, 1993; Lam, 2000).

Summary of Literature Reviewed

While urban schools tend to have a sizeable administrative staff, rural principals often face accountability challenges alone even though they are required to meet the same accountability standards as their larger counterparts (Preston et al., 2014). Research has been done to guide the urban, novice principal where minimal research has been conducted on how the rural, novice principal adjusts to their new role in running a school as an instructional leader.

This gap in the research is where this study will add value to educational administration. This recent research, qualitative in nature, complements an existing body of qualitative research on the daily lives and work of school principals. Taken together, research on the principalship has emphasized the diverse responsibilities principals juggle in multiple roles as instructional leaders (Lowenhaupt, 2014). This paper argues for a focus on novice leadership challenges that deepen and expand our understanding of how rural school principals enact and influence change using instructional leadership as a guide.

Chapter 3 presents the methodology for the study. The rationale for this study's case study design is given. The study's sample and participants are discussed, and data collection and analysis processes are described.

CHAPTER 3. METHODOLOGY

The purpose of the methodology section is to inform this study of novice, rural principals' most emerging practices as school leaders and their challenges as they transition into a building principal. This section first highlights the epistemological scope chosen for this study. It then provides an overview of phenomenology as the chosen methodology for this qualitative research. The methodology section specifically talks about the application of the theoretical framework, and how it is used throughout the study. The methodology section concludes with ethical considerations followed by quality and verification checks, which are shared to ensure that a well crafted data collection process has been established.

Epistemology

The epistemological scope for this study is rooted in social constructivism. The focus of social constructivism is to uncover the ways in which individuals and groups participate in the creation of their perceived social reality (Crotty, 1998). The social constructivist approach centers on the idea that meaning is not discovered but rather formulated or created with the gathering of information. In this study, constructivist leadership is defined as the reciprocal processes that enable participants in an educational community to construct meanings that lead toward a common purpose of schooling (Bauch, 2001).

In the case of social constructivism in this study, those social realities are an individual's interpretations of their work as a rural principal, how they respond to others and how they build relationships. At the heart of constructivist leadership is the assumption that individuals in the community can work together to construct meaning

and knowledge and such processes require the emergence of enduring relationships (Bauch, 2001). Because the purpose of the study is to identify the challenges facing novice, rural principals as they strive to perform a role demanding a breadth of management and instructional leadership responsibilities, the theoretical perspective is sensemaking. That is, the sense, meanings, or interpretations individuals attach to their experiences are developed in social contexts through social mechanisms, such as various forms of communication and interaction (Lee, 1991).

Methodology

The methodology for this study is qualitative in nature targeting a phenomenological approach because I wanted to learn about the novice, rural principals' lived experiences in their new role. Phenomenology is a method of inquiry drawing from the fields of philosophy and psychology that provides a deep understanding of a phenomenon as experienced by several individuals (Creswell, 2014). Qualitative research is used when a problem or issue needs to be explored (Creswell, 2013) and one needs a complex, detailed understanding of the issue. Phenomenological research uses the analysis of significant statements, the generation of meaning units, and the development of what Moustakas (1994) called an "essence description." An "essence description" is the condition or quality without which a thing would not be what it is. Phenomenology is the reflective analysis of real-world experiences (Moustakas, 1994) that allows the researchers to reveal the essence of things and provides insights on the phenomenon. Discovering the meaning of the human experience is how this type of research applies to my analytic approach.

Qualitative research design is an interactive, empirical model utilizing a reflexive process that operates through every stage of a project (Maxwell, 2013) and is characterized by making adjustments and changes progressively, so that the researcher may achieve his or her goals. Additionally, qualitative research is a situated activity that locates the observer in the world (Creswell, 2013). Qualitative research consists of a set of interpretative, naturalistic approaches that make the world visible (Creswell, 2013). Qualitative research has the ability to explore and articulate attitudes, perceptions, experiences, and underlying ideological beliefs (Abt, 1978; Herriott & Firestone, 1983; Johnson, 2014; Ritchie & Spencer, 2002) while assuming multiple realities and interpretations of a singular event (Merriam, 2009); therefore, allowing novice, rural principals to share their challenges and express how they transitioned into their new role. Moreover, qualitative researchers study occurrences in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them (Creswell, 2013).

One conducts qualitative research when he or she wants to empower individuals to share their own stories in a flexible manner and hear their voices (Creswell, 2013). Qualitative research today involves closer attention to the interpretative nature of inquiry by situating the study in one's natural setting and by utilizing key interview protocol (Maxwell, 2013). The use of complex reasoning through inductive and deductive logic is necessary because it determines the participants' meanings; additionally, it uses reflexivity by positioning participants in the qualitative study and exploring how their experiences inform their interpretation of the information (Creswell, 2013).

The role of the researcher is to understand the participants' experiences and to identify a common theme in order to develop a deeper understanding about the phenomenon. This description consists of what they experienced and how they experienced it (Moustakas, 1994). Moustakas (1994) has shown that by focusing more on participant experiences using epoché, or bracketing, in which the researcher sets aside his or her own experiences as much as possible, he or she is then able to take a fresh perspective toward the phenomenon. Although this state is seldom perfectly achieved, it is how Moustakas (1994) posited the research should be completed.

Phenomenology

Phenomenology is an interpretative process wherein the researcher formulates an interpretation of the meaning inherent to lived experience (Creswell, 2013). The purpose of phenomenology is to reduce individual experiences with a phenomenon to a description of the universal essence, or grasp of the very nature of the thing (Creswell, 2013). Phenomenological research describes the common meaning for individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon (Creswell, 2013). The researcher gathers data from people who have experienced the phenomenon and develops the collective spirit of their experiences (Creswell, 2013).

Qualitative data analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994), including sensemaking theory, comparative analysis techniques, and other phenomenological procedures (Charmaz, 2014), were used to examine interview transcripts and determine common themes. A phenomenological researcher develops clusters of meaning from participants' statements into themes (Creswell, 2013). The researcher recognizes and specifies the broad philosophical assumptions of phenomenology (Creswell, 2013). This researcher

did not seek to sort out the interactions of multiple actors and interactions, but rather to describe the experiences of novice, rural principals and multiple variables of potential importance in one specific study (Merriam, 2009, Weaver-Hightower, 2008).

Potential Study Limitations

Potential biases of the researcher are recognized as a study limitation. I am currently serving in an administrative role and have mentored novice, rural principals in districts located in the region bound by this case. Although participating principals in this study were in their first three years of rural principalship, my expertise as a mentor may include a potential bias in my first-hand knowledge of their struggles and successes. I recognize that I also possess an insider perspective as a former principal who worked in K-12 rural schools. During the time of this research I served as a rural principal and rural superintendent and then transitioned to the special education director position in a district office in a suburban school district. Prior to becoming an administrator, I taught students with disabilities in a public suburban high school. This study recognizes my own sensemaking of novice, rural principals in this context, addressing this through a bracketing process throughout data collection and analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Due to my proximity and relationships with the participants, I have redacted specific information about the participants' communities, districts, and schools from the findings. Additionally, I have removed data that I deemed too personal and identifiable to the participants in order to protect their identities in alignment with IRB guidelines. In some cases, I removed data from the transcribed records because the excerpts were potentially identifiable to specific participants and their colleagues in their schools.

Findings of the phenomenon study highlight experiences of novice, rural principals and the challenges they face as they transition into their new role as instructional leaders. The data analysis of the broader units and detailed descriptions summarize what the participants have experienced and the how they have experienced it (Moustakas, 1994). Generalizability of the case findings to other principals in the state and nationally is not possible. Additionally, the findings surrounding this research are unique to this Midwestern state, but they could be interpreted in the context of the literature and compared to other novice, rural principals' experiences. Although the study findings cannot be considered typical experiences of all who transition into a novice principal role in a rural setting, this research adds to the literature about novice, rural principals and their leadership because it shares real-life experiences learned by current novice, rural principals.

Methods

The primary data collection strategy included participant interviews because they shared their sense of what being a novice, rural principal is like. Qualitative-naturalistic methods of inquiry were explored in schools. Participants were given a choice as to where they preferred to conduct the interview and all twelve participants chose to conduct their interview in their natural school setting—their principal office. A set of guidelines, as outlined below, addressed the requirements of an organized, disciplined, systematic, and rigorous study. The initial preparation of phenomenology is to investigate a topic and question rooted in human experience, thereby constituting autobiographical meanings and values. Multiple, in-depth interviews with participants were necessary and it was recommended by research that the researcher interview five to

twenty-five participants who have all experienced the phenomenology. For my study I chose to interview twelve participants who had all experienced the phenomenon. The description culminated in the essence of the experiences for several individuals who had all experienced the phenomenon (Creswell, 2014). Data collection was used to determine criteria to locate and select participants, develop questions to guide 60-90 minute interviews, whether face-to-face or via phone, provide information to participants regarding the nature and purpose of the research, and the establishment of an agreement that included informed consent, and lengthy interviews with participants were conducted—interviews that focused on the specific experiences of the novice, rural principal.

Application of Theoretical Framework

Each participant conducted a 60-90 minute recorded interview in person or remotely using the same semi-structured interview questions. The guided interview questions focused on the principals using sensemaking as the theoretical framework while reflecting on the two research questions including instructional leadership, challenges, and rural leadership. Upon the completion of each interview, the recorded interview was downloaded, labeled by participant, uploaded into the REV transcription service, and stored in CyBox. Once the transcription was created by REV, an email was received and the interview was saved into a Word document and labeled accordingly per participant. A hard copy of each interview was printed to begin the coding process. The hard copies of each interview were kept in a locked safe when not used for the purpose of the capstone and dissertation.

For the capstone phase of the dissertation process, six participants were interviewed and six emerging themes were identified during the open coding process. For the dissertation, six additional participants were interviewed and ten emerging themes were identified during the open-coding process.

Data was first coded using open coding in an initial line-by-line procedure. Themes naturally emerged and were established as part of the open coding process and each theme was given a specific highlighted color. Once a theme was established, it was identified when each interview transcription was read and highlighted accordingly.

Open coding is a process of tagging units of data that may be relevant to the study, a process that utilizes codes emerging from the first review of data (Charmaz, 2014). During this phase, a priori constructs selected from the literature review were also employed to focus the analysis and provide external validity (Charmaz, 2014). Textual data were categorized into codes, data was analyzed, storylines were created and utilized, and memos to capture the meaning of the participants were compiled for clarification and interpretation (Stuckey, 2015).

During the coding process, textual descriptions of participants' perspectives and experiences were developed and organized thematically into units of meaning. All coding used pseudonyms to keep the names of the novice principals confidential. Coding was applied by examining the theoretical framework of sensemaking from within the context of a phenomenological study to be able to better understand what the participants were contemplating as they led as novice, rural principals.

Focused coding followed the initial coding stage by comparing initial codes and data to one another to reveal patterns (Charmaz, 2014; Miles & Huberman, 1994). Initial

codes were combined and clustered with the purpose of relating categories and subcategories to one another and determining the most salient codes found within the data.

Codes were compared to the study's research questions during the final analysis stage. Thematic codes were developed from the previous literature on instructional leadership, challenges faced by novice and rural principals, and rural leadership. Themes and clusters were created to assist with the analysis phase. All participant interviews were color coded in phases, the first six participants and the second six participants, to determine the themes based on the conceptual and theoretical framework. After themes were established, interview data was analyzed and summarized into the identified themes to communicate the lessons learned from the novice, rural principals. After themes were determined, participant quotes were reviewed to determine which quotes best represented each theme and were added into a document. After all themes had the necessary quotes to best represent them, a chart was created to review how many quotes were used per participant to guarantee that all participants were all represented evenly.

Data Analysis

The phenomenological research study includes sources of interview data collected in their context (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Merriam, 2009). All of my participants chose to conduct the interview in their school office. Use of data interviews ensures that the phenomena under study is examined through a variety of lenses to explore the complexity of the issue. In this manner, each interview piece is perceived as contributing to the researcher's understanding of the phenomena as a whole (Baxter & Jack, 2008). The phenomenological design has strong philosophical underpinnings and typically involves

conducting interviews (Moustakas, 1994). Participants provided accounts collected through semi-structured interviews conducted both in person and via telephone. Nine participants conducted the interviews in person, while three of the interviews occurred over the phone. Building on the data from the first to second research question and highlighting experiences from the participants is part of the phenomenological data collection process (Creswell, 2013). The phenomena under investigation is novice, rural principalship as experienced by a selected set of participants in one Midwestern state.

For data analysis purposes, all interview transcripts included two coding procedures based on an analytic inductive approach (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998). Qualitative techniques using open coding and a priori coding employing comparative analysis were exercised to analyze the various sources of data collected throughout the study; moreover, the basic strategies of comparative analysis were inductive in nature (Merriam, 2009). Comparative analysis herein sought to compare different data sources, groups, or cases (Charmaz, 2014). Particular incidents were compared with other incidents in the same set of data or across data sets. Throughout the comparison process, differences and similarities guided emerging models or theories that applied to a specific practice or case (Charmaz, 2014; Merriam, 2009). For data analysis purposes, all interview transcripts included two coding procedures: initial open coding and a priori using CyBox (Charmaz, 2014). Initial coding began during data collection and any additional coding followed. All coding phases placed an emphasis on actions and processes identified in the data as suggested by Charmaz (2014). After the themes were identified, a chart was created to ensure that all 12 participant voices were heard in the findings. Using phenomenology as the framework, I allowed the participants to make

sense of their experiences as a novice, rural principal and this approach guided the data analysis process.

Selection Criteria

Each participant was a novice, rural public school principal. I obtained a list of novice principals from the state administrator association. The state administrator association is an organization that serves school administrators in a Midwestern state wherein I conducted my interviews. The state administrator association conducts various training opportunities for principals, district administration personnel, and superintendents. The state administrator association also has an attorney on staff to offer legal assistance to local school districts in time of need. The state administrator association Executive Director collaborated as a client during my capstone process with plans to gain meaningful information to enhance the state administrator association's novice principal mentor program since the majority of the state employs rural principals. The state administrator association also works with the public school districts to assign experienced principal mentors for the novice, rural principals' first two years on the job. The state administrator association expects its mentors to arrange face-to-face meetings with the novice, rural principal several times during the school year as well as frequent communication via phone and email on an as-needed basis when the novice, rural principal requests support.

Once the list of novice, rural principals in the state was obtained, I sent an email to possible participants to assess interest. After the novice, rural principal communicated his or her interest in participating in my study, the IRB approved consent form was emailed to the novice, rural principal for their review. The novice, rural principal was

also sent the agreement to participate form. The novice, rural principal completed the form, scanned it, attached it to an email, and forwarded it to my email. I then printed off the completed consent form and kept in a safe with the rest of the study materials. After receiving the completed documents, I followed up with a phone call to the willing participant to set up a date and time for the 60-90 minute interview.

Novice is defined as one who has been employed in the role of site [building] principal for less than three years (Gentilucci, et. al., 2013). Four of the twelve participants were in their first year as the building principal. Seven of the twelve participants were in their second year as building principals and one of the twelve participants was in their third year as building principal. Rural is defined by the National Center for Education Statistics as “distant rural,” or “census-defined rural territory that is more than 5 miles or less than or equal to 25 miles from an urbanized area” (NCES, 2006). Metropolitan counties are those including a city of at least 50,000 or whose adjoining counties have highly urbanized populations (Hobbs, 1994). Although it is laborious to define a universal set of characteristics shared by these areas, many researchers have discerned some general features of rural communities and their schools (Bauch, 2001).

Of the twelve novice, rural principals, two participants served in school buildings with less than 700 students, three participants served in school buildings less than 500 students, four participants served in school buildings less than 300 students, two participants served in school buildings less than 200 students and one participant served in a school building with less than 100 students. Twelve principals were chosen as a representation of the current needs of novice, rural principals. Six of the twelve

principals were men and six of the twelve principals were woman. Data was obtained by twelve participants for this dissertation; moreover, data provided was sufficient to clearly understand the challenges they faced as novice, rural public school principals within the realm of instructional leadership.

Interviews

Interviews were conducted during the 2016-2017 and 2017-2018 school years and the analysis of data was reviewed. The descriptions and interpretations of others were uncovered within the research with an understanding that the study was not perceived the same by all study participants illustrated multiple views of the study. Thus, a set of interviews were used to collect multiple perspectives within the phenomenology study. Interviews occurred in the novice, rural principals' office setting and were audio recorded. I created an interview protocol that utilized the guidance of twenty-five semi-structured questions. The questions were created to reflect the literature review and its focus on instructional leadership, rural schools, and principal development. Additional clarification of participants' answers occurred during the interviews as needed.

Semi-structured interviews were selected for data collection due to the method's ability to adapt to the unique views of participants. Merriam (2009) proposes that qualitative investigations often require open-ended and less structured techniques. Because semi-structured interviews attempt to elicit specific information from participants, some guiding structure directs the interview process. However, the data collection method allows the researcher to respond to the situation as the interview proceeds, adapting the questioning to explore new topics as they emerge (Merriam,

2009). As in phenomenology, the researcher mediates between different meanings and makes interpretations of the meaning of the lived experiences (Creswell, 2013).

Interview questions using sensemaking for participants in novice, rural principal roles were developed by the researcher with the goal of eliciting the participants' views on their role as a novice, rural principal and the transitional challenges they faced as instructional leaders. Following Hatch's (2002) suggestion for question types, questions were generated for the novice, rural principal participant interview to address the interviews' purpose. A total of twenty-five semi-structured questions comprised the interview protocol that addressed the participants' background, personal opinions about their role as an instructional leader, and efforts to support their role as a novice, rural public school principal using sensemaking as the theoretical perspective.

Semi-structured protocols developed by the researcher were employed for all interviews. According to Creswell (2009), a protocol should be used within semi-structured interviews for asking and recording questions in an interview, with the additional intention of separating data collection and reflection. Hatch (2002) suggests that when developing interview questions, researchers should consider them as guiding questions. It is recommended that guiding questions include background questions, essential questions, and probing questions for follow up. Interview questions utilized embedded the use of sensemaking. Hatch (2002) further suggests including three varying types of essential questions in the protocol: descriptive, structural, and contrast. The researcher-developed interview protocols used in this study included questions of each type to collect robust data on the participant's perceptions and sensemaking. Questions were ordered to begin with the participant's past experiences as an educator, move to

present understanding and practices as an instructional leader, and end with reflection of serving in a rural setting, while keeping sensemaking as the theoretical perspective in mind. Phenomenological experiences were taken into account and reflections were made.

All interviews were conducted with professional employment schedules and location of the participants kept in mind. Interviews lasted 60-90 minutes. Nine of the twelve interviews were conducted in person. With the participants' consent, as listed in the IRB, audio was recorded for later verbatim transcription. Transcribing interviews was recommended by Merriam (2009).

For the first six participants in my pilot as the capstone, twenty-five, IRB approved, semi-structured interview questions were juxtaposed with less probing questions. For the additional six participants to complete the full-scale dissertation the same twenty-five IRB approved, semi-structured interview questions were posed and as natural conversation occurred, more probing questions were put forth specifically to determine the sense the principals were making of their rural communities and rural experiences.

Data Organization

All twelve participant interviews were recorded with a recording device whether they were conducted in person or on the phone. A consent form was then signed by each participant prior to the interview and kept in a safe with the other study documents. After the interview, the recording device software was downloaded, imported, and sent to REV, an online transcription, captions, and translation company. The REV company was approved in my IRB for use as a transcription company. Within a minimal number of

hours, the participant's interview transcriptions were annotated and a document was sent to me via email. I maintained a data storage system that ensured organization of both digital and hard-copy formatted sources. Data and documentation were stored and organized in a series of file folders. A digital data collection folder was created containing data collected throughout the case in CyBox. Each participant's transcribed interview was placed into CyBox through Iowa State University and a hard copy was printed for my use to activate the coding process. Each hard-copy folder contained a spreadsheet utilized for recording all data collection incidents. Subfolders for interview analysis were created. Additionally, a subfolder designated for participant information was created with a spreadsheet included for documenting all contacts with participants. Binders were utilized to house any hard-copy documents of data and other information collected, subdivided by the same categories included in the digital folder.

For the first six participants during my pilot as the capstone, open coding occurred by line-by-line highlighting on the hard-copy transcribed documents and themes were then developed. For the first six participant interviews I used a coding partner as a way to ensure the credibility of my analysis and debriefed the information gleaned. Intriguingly enough, my partner and I independently determined the same themes from the first six participants; consequently, we colored coded them in a similar manner. As I added six more participants to continue my full-scale dissertation, open coding occurred again, albeit this time without a coding partner. Each transcript was analyzed and interpreted in its entirety, open coding and a priori coding occurred using the literature reviewed as a guide (Charmez, 2014). The coding was then divided into themes that accurately represented participant discourse.

To remain as objective as possible and receptive to the new data obtained, I commenced the coding process a second time with six new participants and determined themes from the new data obtained. Any new themes that emerged from the second set of six participants then afforded me the opportunity to go back to the first set of six participants to see if they shared any of the same themes. Clusters of meaning were developed from participant discourse and meanings were then created.

Participants did not receive compensation for their participation in this study. Documents and artifacts were not used in this study, but instead were based on the novice, rural principals' views and perceptions of how they made sense of their new role as a rural principal. After coding transpired, member checking also occurred by the participants and direct quotes were ascribed to validate the obtained data.

Ethical Considerations

My positionality as both an insider and an outsider within the study is also recognized as a potential bias and limitation and needs to be an ethical consideration. My involvement with mentoring novice, rural principals within the region has placed me in a support network surrounding the role of the principal. I recognize that I hold an insider perspective as a participant as a former rural principal, rural superintendent, and now a suburban district office director. Additionally, I am an outsider within individual districts with the case and also hold the role of observer. I recognize that the study is potentially influenced by professional relationships with study participants (Miles & Huberman, 1994). I am aware of this influence and have ensured that my personal relationships and experiences do not bias interpretation of data by utilizing member checks with all study participants in addition to bracketing for positionality.

I obtained the necessary human subjects training provided by the university overseeing this research and educational degree. This study has been approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB). The purpose of the IRB is to ensure that appropriate steps are taken to protect the rights and welfare of humans participating as subjects in a research study. My research did not include any persons from vulnerable populations. In addition, the participants would not be included in the study if they held a principalship in a suburban or urban setting or if they were an assistant principal or dean of students. Participation in this study was restricted to head principals. None of the participants were asked to provide any sort of distinguishing data—such as medical history, personal characteristics, and so on—for screening purposes prior to enrollment in this study.

A common language was used in this study; English was the speaking language of all participants. Each participant was provided the IRB approved consent form to be signed prior to the interview. All participant's signatures were provided in writing before conducting any interviews. I did not hold any supervisory, evaluative, administrative, or any other position of power over any of the participants. The participants were provided with the necessary consent criteria including the potential psychological risks: a feeling of anxiety while being interviewed; the feeling of risk associated with expressing one's ideas, views, and experiences regarding the taking on of a new role as building principal in a rural setting; and the feeling of uncertainty in detailing how this trajectory had impacted their lives. The economic risks outlined prior to conducting the interviews pertained to perceived risk to one's employment because novice, rural principals were going to be sharing information about how they performed their jobs.

Additionally each participant was provided the informational risk of breach of confidentiality that their identity could be discovered, however unlikely, as I created pseudonyms to the textual data file for each participant in the study. The participants were also given consent understanding that I cannot guarantee complete confidentiality and that potential risk of the participant and their school district being identified, yet these risks were greatly minimized by limiting access to the data collection and analysis to me as the researcher. At no time were the participants identified by name, school, or district. The key for the study aligning the actual participant and pseudonyms will be destroyed three years after the conclusion of the study.

By signing the consent the participants also allowed the interviews to be audio recorded and then uploaded into REV for transcription. The participants were also informed prior to their interview that the transcriptions would be imported into CyBox and a hard-copy document would then be generated for my use to conduct appropriate coding to determine themes, which would then be placed into the final dissertation product. All hard copies of the interview transcriptions were kept in a locked safe in my residential office space. Participants were also informed in the consent that the appropriate firewalls on my laptop were password protected by the school server and accessible only to me and my committee chair. Additionally, participants were notified in the consent that audio recordings would be deleted from CyBox at the conclusion of the study. Each participant signed the consent form indicating that they voluntarily agreed to participate in the study and that the study had been explained to them in minutiae. Each participant was provided a copy of their signed consent form prior to the interview process.

Quality and Verification Checks

Phenomenology research requires the use of verification checks and measures to ensure quality standards throughout data collection and analysis (Creswell, 2014; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2003). Multiple processes were included in the study to meet this requirement. All interviews were carefully linked to the study's purpose and the research questions throughout data collection and analysis (Stake, 1995). A precise system of data organization and management was employed to document that all procedures were followed as planned and that all required data were collected. This data management was continued throughout the study with careful attention to documentation processes throughout data analysis.

An additional quality and verification measure was achieved through my professional connections to the research topic and participants (Creswell, 2009). I had established relationships with some participants prior to beginning the research study due to principal mentorship opportunities and principal networking. This allowed me to communicate easily with all participants which further enhanced an equitable exchange of ideas throughout the study. Employing a trusting environment, participants were invited to review drafts of their interviews for accuracy and provide corrections as needed through member checking (Stake, 1995). Once the data was analyzed, reviewed, and imported into the dissertation, participants were invited to review the drafts. Six of the twelve participants willingly agreed to review the information and member checked the data for accuracy.

Although I may have unintentionally introduced potential bias to the study's topic due to past experiences and connections to participants, recognition of potential

researcher bias at the onset of the study provided another quality check (Creswell, 2009). Potential research bias was diminished through researcher and participant reviews of interviews and debriefing conferences with my dissertation committee chair. The extensive use of informant quotes in the findings served as an additional check for researcher bias, ensuring that findings were grounded in data collection and participant checking and providing participant voice.

Summary

This chapter described the phenomenology design for this research. Phenomenology methodology was selected to illuminate the experience of novice, rural public school principals experiencing the challenges they face as instructional leaders. The phenomenological sample was circumscribed by geographical location and implementation timeline, including participants in Iowa schools between the 2016-2017 and 2017-2018 school years. All data was analyzed using inductive, comparative analysis to generate themes describing the novice, rural principals' sensemaking experiences. Quality and verification checks were provided through case organization, documentation of an audit trail for data collection and analysis, and member-checking.

Chapter 4 presents the findings from data collection and analysis in the study from the collected interviews. The study's themes are described and are presented in reference to the study's research questions.

CHAPTER 4. FINDINGS

In review, I posed two research questions: (1) What instructional leadership concepts and actions do rural, novice principals describe as most important to their emerging practices as school leaders? (2) What are the most emergent leadership challenges that novice, rural principals identify as they transitioned into a building principal position? The principals shared their instructional leadership concepts and how these ideas affected their actions as rural, novice principals. Throughout this chapter I will share quotes from the twelve novice, rural principals. All twelve were included as data, except in cases where less than twelve shared this idea, and this is noted specifically in the data analysis and findings as appropriate. The quotes will be of varied lengths to provide key pieces of data interpreting their judgements and sensemaking experiences from their new roles.

Participants

Twelve participants were interviewed as part of this dissertation since research dictates that twelve participants is a solid number to obtain valid data. The first six participants were interviewed in the pilot as a capstone and the second six participants were interviewed to complete the dissertation study. Four of the six principals' prior administrative experience came from larger, suburban school districts. Eight of the principals came to the principal position from positions as teachers in rural schools.

Despite the differences in professional backgrounds, they each provided insights on how the rural community context challenged the learning and development as new leaders as they strived to be instructional leaders. A summary of the participants' background and community characteristics is displayed in Table 1.

Table 1

Principal, School, and County Characteristics

<i>Name (pseudonym)</i>	<i>Principal Years at School</i>	<i>Professional Background in Education</i>	<i>Grade levels</i>	<i>School Enrollment and Ethnicity</i>	<i>Poverty level</i>	<i>Bachelor Degree</i>	<i>County Economy Type</i>	<i>Median Household Income</i>
Catherine	2	Special Education Teacher	K-12	< 100 93% White	35%	31%	Farming Manufacturing	\$59,887
Samantha	2	Special Education and Elementary Education Teacher	9-12	<300 96% White	27%	16%	Farming Manufacturing Railroad	\$51,782
Jonathan	3	Business and Technology Education Teacher	9-12	<700 95% White	44%	17%	Farming Manufacturing, Railroad	\$47,843
Samuel	2	Physical Education and Health Teacher	5-8	<700 95% White	44%	17%	Farming, Manufacturing Railroad	\$47,843
Madeleine	1	Elementary, Middle Language Arts, and Technology, and Special Education Teacher	6-12	<200 97% White	29%	10%	Farming, Manufacturing	\$42,495
Sarah	1	Elementary Education Teacher	2-4	<500 92% White	44%	17%	Farming, Manufacturing Railroad	\$47,843
Kevin	1	Special Education Teacher	K-5	<500 96% White	26%	19%	Farming, Manufacturing Construction	\$58,134

Table 1. Continued

Carl	2	Special Education Teacher	PK-12	<300 98% White	55%	6%	Farming, Construction	\$50,174
Jason	2	Secondary Education Language Arts Teacher	3-5	<300 93% White	50%	10%	Farming, Construction	\$34,136
Tim	2	Elementary Education Teacher	PK-5	<200 94% White	34%	15%	Farming, Manufacturing, Construction	\$57,453
Anne	2	Elementary Education Teacher	K-12	<500 96% White	22%	19%	Farming, Manufacturing	\$57,343
Amber	1	Elementary Education Teacher	PK-1	<300 95% White	44%	17%	Farming, Manufacturing, Railroad	\$47,843
State Average	NA	NA	NA	89% Majority White	12.5%	15%	Management- Business, Education, Service Occupations, Sales, Production, Transportation	\$53,183

Catherine

Catherine was in her second year as a building principal of a school specifically serving students with special needs in grades 2-12. Her school educates 48 students. This school not only serves students in the principal's own district, but twenty-five other school districts in the Midwestern U.S. state. Students placed in her school have severe psychological and behavioral challenges. Catherine was formerly a special education teacher for six years; she then concluded her teaching career serving as a behavioral interventionist for three years in a suburban setting. As a special education teacher she taught students with disabilities, ranging from mild to severe, while serving as chief negotiator for the teacher union in her district. Catherine admits that she became burned out in teaching fairly quickly because she was actively involved in some litigation cases while she was teaching. The involvement in such cases placed excess levels of stress on her job as a teacher.

As a principal of a special needs school, Catherine finds it challenging to serve all the students she gets requests for from the surrounding school districts. Her school is the only type of educational facility that serves students with severe mental and behavioral disabilities in the state. Catherine and her lead team meet individually with the incoming students in their local school districts in an attempt to better acquaint themselves with the needs of each student. At that point, Catherine and her lead team decide if the student is one who they will serve in their school.

The educational facility consists of students with various behavioral concerns, thus nearly each minute of every day is unique. This poses a challenge for Catherine as an instructional leader; therefore, she feels she is in responsive mode at all times since she cannot predict student needs on a minute-by-minute basis. Catherine's school has a

small number of certified teachers, but also has a large number of teacher associates. In some cases the classes of four students have one certified teacher and four teacher associates. When students display challenging behaviors, it can be an all-hands-on-deck situation; moreover, a situation may take two to four of the associates out of the classroom to intervene.

A shift in funding occurred in the past two years within the state involving this special school. In prior years, the school received the per-pupil cost, per the state, and the additional costs needed to support the student with disabilities. The school received the same funding to support her teachers and teacher associates regardless of their years of experience. Two years ago, the state changed the funding formula allowing Catherine's school to charge the local school district for their student's specific teacher and teacher associate by classroom experience. This caused strife between the local school districts and Catherine's school as it became much more expensive to serve each student.

As a building principal, it became apparent that Catherine needed to work very hard to build stronger relationships with local school districts to ensure her school maintained the number of students it could serve. She also learned that she needed to communicate the changes in funding to the local school districts so they clearly understood the financial impact when sending a student to Catherine's school. This added another level of administrative services the principal needed to communicate. Catherine realizes that not only does she need to serve the students and staff in her school on a daily basis, but she also needs to clearly communicate what her school offers and how they can serve students in surrounding school districts.

Samantha

Samantha was in her second year as a high school building principal serving students in grades 9-12. Her school educates 180 students. Prior to becoming a high school principal, Samantha taught special education for grades 9-12 in a neighboring school district for ten years. During that time, she went back to school and earned her master's degree in special education and her administration degree. At this time in her career, she felt she needed a change and wanted to find a way to serve more students, so she took a job as an educational consultant in a state agency that serves multiple school districts in various capacities in the Midwestern U.S state. Although her role had always been teaching students with disabilities, she felt the need to learn more about curriculum and assessment for all students. Samantha served in this capacity for two years. During this time, a job opened up as an assistant principal serving students with specific disabilities. Samantha felt it was time to go back to her passion of serving students with disabilities. She felt this role was a perfect fit, yet the commute to the school was considerably longer than what she had hoped for. Additionally, her family responsibilities were such that she felt she needed to work in closer proximity to her home in order to support one of her own children's needs.

Samantha served in this capacity for five years. At the end of her fifth year, the high school principalship in a neighboring district had become vacated; consequently, she applied and was chosen as the new head principal. Samantha has been in this role for two years. The school she commenced serving had gone through much strife, yet Samantha felt she was the perfect fit. Prior to Samantha's tenure, her school had five different principals in five years. Her staff was unsettled by this turn of events and wanted someone to come in, invest in their school, and stay. She also learned that this school

district was in financial distress and deep discussions of consolidating with a neighboring school district had occurred between the part-time superintendent (formally retired) and school board. The thought of losing their school district identity was unsettling to the school staff. Samantha's staff was very alarmed and the future of the school district was questionable. Additionally, Samantha learned that the athletic director and head custodian had been at the high school for over thirty years and collectively took over the role of making decisions for the school since there had been five principals in five years. Samantha knew her focus was to build relationships and trust amongst her staff, while clearly communicating that she was now the person to make the decisions.

Jonathan

Jonathan was in his third year as a high school building principal serving students in grades 9-12. His school educates 700 students. Prior to becoming a principal, Jonathan was an assistant principal for one year in an urban setting. Prior to entering administration, Jonathan taught business and technology for five years in an urban school for grades 9-12 and was also the head girls basketball coach for that school district. When Jonathan served as an assistant principal in the urban setting, he was among three other assistant principals in that building. Jonathan's role was to oversee curriculum and assessment and reported directly to the head principal. At no time did Jonathan work directly with students conducting discipline, special education issues, or 504 Plans. In urban districts, multiple assistant principals are hired to fill specific roles, and Jonathan's was specifically designed for oversight of curriculum and assessment.

After one year of serving in this capacity, Jonathan felt he was ready to move into a head principal role. Jonathan applied to various school districts somewhat close to his

home, and was offered the position he currently serves in as high school principal. Jonathan quickly learned that this principalship was going to be very different from what he had experienced in the past. He was now working as the only principal in a rural school district. Additionally, Jonathan drives 45 minutes to and from work each day.

Jonathan quickly experienced some growing pains as he realized that he did not have experience disciplining students, overseeing special education, creating a schedule, and everything else that was expected of him. Jonathan became overwhelmed. Fortunately for him, the previous principal was let go due to aggressive victimization, and Jonathan knew, contrary to the previous principal, he presented a positive personality as a nice guy. Just by engaging with others, his disposition could make significant inroads with the school staff. Jonathan made minimal changes his first year and did a great job listening to staff to learn what was going well and what needed to be changed. Jonathan ended his first year feeling confident and well-received by most of the staff. He realized that his positive personality had assuaged the levels of anxiety in the high school.

Jonathan entered his second year like he ended the first one and thought that being a nice guy would get him far. Jonathan quickly learned that in year two he had to make difficult decisions and have crucial conversations. He found this was contrary to his “nice guy image,” and he found himself shying away from the inevitable. Jonathan’s unwillingness to create conflict in confronting issues created a new fear he had not experienced. He relied too heavily on his superintendent; moreover, the superintendent realized that Jonathan needed much coaching and guidance. The superintendent found

himself supporting many of the duties Jonathan was expected to do in his high school. This created an imbalance between work and home causing challenge with Jonathan's home life. The stress of leading a school 45 minutes away was pulling him from family time and priorities, thus putting undue stress on his family and personal relationships.

Additionally, Jonathan was perceived as having favorites in his building and he even convinced several of his former staff from the urban school to join the rural high school. It was also perceived that Jonathan avoided critical meetings with students and families. Jonathan experienced a significant discipline disruption to the school midyear and found himself focusing the majority of his time on that situation and seemed to let other important things go. He relied heavily on the special education director, who also served as a principal in the district, to make decisions for him regarding students with disabilities and 504 Plans. By the end of the year, Jonathan learned that some of his strongest teachers had chosen to leave the high school to work under a different leader. Although the superintendent had been working diligently throughout the year to assist Jonathan, he realized that more of an intervention was needed. The superintendent coached Jonathan all summer and even encouraged him to take steps to balance his relationships at home.

Jonathan started year three as high school principal in a rural setting feeling refreshed and ready to meet the challenge. He took ownership of exigent conversations and expectations of leading a building. The special education director-principal had now left the school district, taking a new role in another district, and Jonathan realized that he must spearhead special education and 504 Plans on his own. With difficult

conversations, guidance, and an action plan for improvement from the superintendent, Jonathan grew as a building leader. Relationships and communication improved significantly. Jonathan's strong background in curriculum and assessment was finally perceived as an asset by his staff as he led them to new paradigms in serving their students. Jonathan realizes he faces significant growth in this role, but he feels far more confident.

Samuel

Samuel was in his second year as a middle school building principal serving students in grades 5-8. His school educates 650 students. Prior to becoming a head middle school principal, he served as an assistant middle school principal in the same school for four years and a dean of students for one year. Additionally, Samuel taught in a non-core subject area for most of his teaching career in grades 5-8 in the same middle school where he is now serving as principal. Samuel also obtained a national level of achievement when he taught physical education and health. Samuel was born and raised in the same school district wherein he taught and now serves as a principal.

During Samuel's thirteenth year as a non-core subject teacher, he decided to start taking administration classes to advance his leadership and critical-thinking skills. Samuel never envisioned being a principal but did see himself moving into an athletic director role within his own school district, or else a neighboring one. During Samuel's fourteenth year of teaching, and shortly thereafter, Samuel took the evaluator training as part of his administration program, the middle school principal at the time approached Samuel to see if he would be interested in becoming a dean of students in the school to assist the head principal. Samuel immediately declined, because he did not feel

this was what he wanted to do with his future. Over the course of that school year, however, the head principal kept approaching him to discuss the strengths he felt Samuel could offer the students and staff. After soul searching and further conversations with the head principal, Samuel decided a dean role would suit him well and get him one step closer to becoming an athletic director. At the end of Samuel's fourteenth year of teaching, he was chosen to be the dean of the middle school.

Little did Samuel know, the transition from being a non-core subject area teacher to becoming a dean (quasi-administrator) in the same middle school would be excruciatingly painful. Even though Samuel had exceptional relationship skills with the students, staff and families in the school, the middle school teachers quickly criticized Samuel's lack of curriculum and assessment knowledge because he was *just* a non-core subject area teacher.

The teachers took every opportunity to confront Samuel during meetings. The head principal knew this would be a challenge, yet felt confident that once they saw Samuel's strengths in working with the students, staff, and families in a larger venue, they would give him a chance. Samuel's first year was tough and he learned very quickly how administration was viewed by the staff. Samuel was once the favorite teacher by many, but now he had entered the precarious "dark side" as an administrator. The close friendships with teachers had to be severed because Samuel knew that his peer group had to change.

He learned very quickly that he could no longer be "one of the guys" playing cards and drinking beer. He was now a face of the middle school and his life had changed significantly. Many conversations occurred between the head principal and

Samuel processing how his friends could no longer see him in the same light as before. Samuel's first year as dean was rough emotionally, but administratively was successful. Samuel learned much about the middle school by viewing it from a different lens. He found that this role was a better fit for him than he had previously anticipated. During the course of the academic year, Samuel had completed all necessary coursework and had become a licensed administrator.

At the conclusion of Samuel's school year as dean, he was once again approached by the head principal and asked if he had considered being an assistant principal for the middle school. This role would offer him even more responsibility, especially in student discipline and special education. Samuel was soon chosen as the new middle school assistant principal.

Samuel's first year as assistant principal went much more smoothly than the previous year. Staff were familiar with his attributes, from his strengths to his areas most in need of improvement. The head principal knew where Samuel needed to gain experience, so she allowed Samuel an opportunity to grow under her leadership. Samuel found himself overseeing all of the student discipline and quickly learning the nuances of special education and 504 Plans. He was also starting to plan professional development opportunities for the staff and was able to visit classrooms more frequently to familiarize himself with the curriculum. Samuel found that being visible and transparent with the staff afforded him the opportunity to be perceived in a very positive light by even the most critical staff members.

Over the next four years, Samuel grew personally and professionally and took on more of a co-principalship rather than an assistant principalship role. During his fourth

year as assistant principal, the head principal was being promoted to a superintendent position and she felt that Samuel had gained all of the necessary skills to become the head principal. Samuel was appointed to the head middle school principal role.

Samuel appreciated all the mentorship opportunities he had received under the previous principal and felt that he was well-prepared for taking on this new role. Samuel shared that the approach the former principal used as a co-principal really helped him transition into his new role. Moreover, he felt he had personally experienced numerous situations and had talked through many others with the former principal, thus setting him up for a successful principalship.

Samuel quickly realized how many decisions the head principal has to make on a daily basis, and that it was now exclusively his responsibility to take ownership and make those tough decisions. Additionally, the school district had been experiencing declining enrollment; therefore, it had been decided that it would not hire an assistant principal for the middle school. Samuel realized that he then held the responsibility of being the sole administrator for the middle school. Samuel credited his preparation in becoming the principal he is today to the strong mentorship he received from the former principal. Samuel continues to develop and thrive as an effective leader who is now more than capable of reflexively articulating the vision of his school.

Madeline

Madeline was in her second year as a middle-high school building principal serving students in grades 6-12. Her school currently educates 100 students. Prior to becoming a principal, Madeline taught second grade for ten years, seventh and eighth grade for ten years, and was an assistant principal for two years in the same school that

she is serving now as principal. When she was a second-grade teacher, the school district had to undergo staff reduction due to declining enrollment and they needed to shuffle people around to fill certain teaching spots. Madeline was chosen to move from being a second grade teacher to becoming a seventh and eighth grade teacher. Madeline was told that she was the one who could most readily make the transition from elementary to secondary, so she then became the middle school language arts and technology teacher. She stayed in that role for the next ten years.

During that time, she found out that her niece was going back to school at a state university to get her administration degree, so Madeline decided to join her niece and get her degree as well. Once her administrative degree was earned, Madeline was asked if she was willing to be the assistant principal and special education director for the same district she had served as second grade and middle school teacher for twenty years. She took the job as assistant principal and special education director and served in that capacity for two years. At the end of those two years Madeline was asked to become the head middle-high school principal. Unfortunately, the school district was forced to make cuts again due to continued declining enrollment, so the following year she served as the middle-high school half-time principal and half-time teacher, yet found herself devoting her entire day to get everything done administratively. Madeline fulfilled those two roles for two years and then found out that the superintendent who had been shared between two school districts and who had served as a principal in one school district forfeited his role as principal so Madeline then became the full-time middle-high school principal.

Madeline found herself learning along the way in administration. Her school district could not afford a special education director, so she was asked to serve in that

capacity while also serving as a middle-high school principal, even though she had no formal special education experience. Madeline shared that she enjoyed her special education course in her administrative training program and felt that she understood students with disabilities because she had taught for twenty years. Madeline felt that she was thrown into her roles very quickly and had to be insightful and perceptive as she navigated her roles as assistant principal and principal. Madeline immediately found herself in a special education case in which the family did not feel their child was being served as expected by the school district. Madeline had to be the administrator responsible for overseeing this student with disabilities to guarantee his Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE).

Over the years, Madeline has been extremely flexible and served students in a variety of capacities. Madeline feels that she can serve students well because she has taught at both the elementary and secondary level. She enjoys her role but still feels like she is gaining knowledge along the way.

Sarah

Sarah was in her first year as a building principal serving students in grades 2-4. Her school educates 400 students. Prior to becoming principal, Sarah taught six years as a second grade teacher and one year as a fifth grade teacher in a suburban setting. Sarah has an elementary education and early childhood degree with a minor in family services. While teaching, Sarah went back to school and obtained her master's degree in elementary education and her reading endorsement. Later in her teaching career she was approached by her assistant principal who had asked her if she had ever thought of becoming a principal. The assistant principal shared with Sarah that she thought her

leadership style and qualities indicated that she could be a good principal. After hearing that advice, Sarah decided once again to go back to school to obtain her administration license. Sarah's first principalship is in a rural school district in an elementary building serving students in grades 2-4. Sarah moved her large family, three hours away, to the rural community where she serves as principal.

Sarah and her family immediately became an integral part of the community. She had a good grasp on what it took to be part of a small town. Sarah has a very young family and is trying to balance her role as a mother, wife, and principal. She clearly understands the commitment it takes to lead an effective school and is not afraid of difficult conversations. Over the course of the school year Sarah realized the stress of taking care of her young family and balancing time between work and home and saw it was causing a strain in her relationships.

Sarah sees her new role as an exciting challenge but confided that her predecessor was not an instructional leader; consequently, she found there were no expectations set to improve instruction in the building. In addition, the staff had not been held to high standards and had little to no accountability. She felt that the things the school was lacking in were some of Sarah's strengths.

Like a typical novice principal, Sarah thought she could change the world, one teacher at a time. Quickly Sarah learned that the staff in her new building were completely satisfied working with the status quo and saw no need for change and improvement. Additionally, Sarah's predecessor was a decidedly solicitous man who avoided having difficult conversations and did not hold the staff accountable for their actions. Sarah's communication style was direct and sometimes harsh when having

conversations with staff. She did not differentiate her tone and communication style between various staff members.

As her first year progressed, Sarah learned that working in a rural community specific staff members had connections with prominent members in the community and school board. She found herself reflecting on how she communicated with her staff so they did not feel threatened. Staff shared with community members and the school board that they felt threatened by Sarah; therefore, they were often intimidated and unwilling to approach her. Sarah learned quickly that in her rural community word travels fast and rumors can impact how people feel about her. While some staff members appreciated Sarah's candid remarks to improve the school and hold people accountable for their actions, others felt intimidated by her approach and refused to talk with her. This created strife in her building and the culture was quickly damaged.

Sarah sees herself as a service leader, someone who is willing to help, and someone who is caring, has good time management, a good listener, is flexible, and visible. Yet, she has learned that although she shows all these great qualities, the way she connects with staff is highly critical to her success. Sarah has needed to reflect on how she comes across when talking with people. This has been difficult to do because Sarah perceives her personality as an important part of her identity and yet she is expected to adjust it to suit the adults she serves in her building. Sarah knows that she now has to rebuild many of the relationships that she fractured, whether wittingly or unwittingly, during her first year as a principal. Sarah feels she can rebuild in her rural community.

Kevin

Kevin was in his first year serving as principal in an elementary school. His school educates 500 students. He received his elementary education degree and coaching minor from a state university. His first job teaching was in a boys' parochial home serving students in grades 3-11 that was supported by a local public school district. Even though his degree was in elementary education, he served as a special education teacher with an emergency license because the school could not find anyone else to teach special education.

The boys' parochial home not only served students in grades 3-11, but had eighteen students in one classroom. Each student was at a different academic level and all eighteen students had behavior plans in their Individual Education Plan (IEP). Kevin found himself learning very quickly and adjusting his practice daily. He was put through several trainings, such as Love and Logic and other behavioral strategy courses. Kevin found himself very overwhelmed as a first-year teacher, especially in this type of setting. He was forever thankful for this experience because he found out very quickly what an IEP was, what all the different accommodations students could receive consisted of, and to appreciate and experience all of the different personalities that come with each IEP.

Kevin approached his superintendent halfway through teaching his first year at the boys' parochial home informing him that he was not having much fun doing what he was doing and felt very isolated as a teacher. Kevin was not part of a school building since the boys' parochial home was in a remote area surrounded by cornfields. Kevin knew he wanted to feel part of a community.

After that conversation with the superintendent, Kevin received a phone call from his former student teaching coordinator informing him of an elementary education teacher opening in a neighboring school district for the following school year. Intriguingly enough, Kevin's student teaching coordinator was the neighboring district's superintendent's spouse. Kevin was offered a position in the neighboring school district teaching fourth grade math and coaching middle school track and high school basketball.

During his three years teaching math, Kevin experienced having two different principals and he started to contemplate becoming an administrator. He realized how important it was to have consistency in the school building. After serving three years in the elementary school, Kevin was asked to move to fifth grade to teach science for the next two years. He also decided to enroll in his master's program to obtain his administrator license. Prior to completing his program, Kevin was offered the elementary principalship in the same building where he taught fourth and fifth grade.

The former principal serving in the elementary school had decided to leave his administrative position and return to the classroom. Very unique, that principal switched positions with Kevin. The former principal was now teaching fifth grade science under Kevin's leadership. Kevin was also fairly young, serving as a principal at the age of 28. Additionally, Kevin had to forfeit his coaching obligations to serve as an elementary principal. Kevin knew there would be potential roadblocks along the way as he was now serving the teachers that he had taught alongside.

Moreover, Kevin had a learning curve at the beginning of his principalship. He was the fourth principal in five years; therefore, he was cognizant of the fact that one of

his main challenges would be to bring consistency to the position to help support the staff. However, he felt he could empathize with his colleagues as he knew how difficult it was to adjust to a change in principals year after year.

Anne

Anne was in her first year as an elementary principal. She serves in a K-12 building, five sections of each grade, with 315 students. Anne grew up in a rural, farming community. As a child, Anne really enjoyed school and although teaching was not her first career choice, she found herself gravitating back to that option. As a high school student, she volunteered in a kindergarten classroom and fell in love with the mentoring role.

Anne attended a small college and received her bachelor of arts in early childhood education, including early childhood special education and a reading endorsement. She taught kindergarten for three years and first grade for one year in a single school district. This school district was in a rural setting, and she experienced having seven different administrators in four years for grades K-12. This was very challenging, especially as a new teacher. Because Anne was working in a rural setting, she often found herself interacting with the superintendent, high school principal, and elementary principal.

After four years, Anne left the school district to find more leadership stability in another rural setting. Fortunately for Anne, she found a more stable administrative team in teaching kindergarten for four years in a rural setting further from her home. Although she never saw herself as a principal, Anne decided to pursue a master's degree in educational leadership. She felt that her experience with her former school district

having multiple administrators in a short period of time created an opportunity for her to understand the need for change.

While completing her master's program, Anne once again felt it was time to move and took a job closer to her hometown teaching K-5 Title One Reading and Math for two years. After completing her master's program, Anne felt she was ready to move into a principalship. Anne quickly found out how challenging it was to be hired as a principal as she saw school districts choose experience over talent. Her current superintendent opined that all new administrators start out with no experience and offered her the job as K-2 elementary principal. Anne deeply appreciated the fact that her superintendent was willing to take a calculated risk in hiring her for the position. Anne feels this is her quintessential job because she now serves as leader in a building where her teachers are educating students in the grades wherein she has extensive experience in teaching.

Carl

Carl is serving as a PK-12 grade principal housing 270 students. Prior to becoming a principal, Carl spent 11 years as a special education teacher in a rural setting, both at the elementary and secondary levels. During his last year of teaching he became a high school behavioral interventionist in a different rural school district. Not only does Carl serve as the PK-12 principal, he wears multiple hats and also serves as the district curriculum director and at-risk coordinator. Carl has his master's degree in curriculum and instruction and obtained his principal licensure through a newer program the state offered called the Midwestern state Principal Leadership Academy. All educators allowed in the program must have been previously awarded a master's degree, and be willing to spend roughly one weekend a month over the course of a two-year period

working toward a principal licensure. Carl serves in a very small school in a rural community.

He and his wife, a college basketball coach, just had their first child. Carl commutes 45 minutes one way to his school every day; understandably, he finds balancing his role and time away from his family a challenge. Carl has already been thinking about whether this new principal role is the most viable option for him and his young family. He shared that he would like to get into a role when he has a smaller grade level focus rather than K-12. He values and appreciates the rural school atmosphere and wants to serve in that capacity long term, yet he feels the distance from his home to school is more of a challenge than he had initially realized.

Carl felt his special education background served him well as he entered his first year as principal. He thinks that by doing constant progress monitoring, using the Four Point Decision Making Rule, noting whether the data was above or below the trend line, and making instructional changes for the Individualized Education Program (IEP), helped shape the way he thinks as an administrator. Carl is constantly asking questions of his staff such as: “Why are we making these instructional decisions?”...“What is guiding us to do that?”...“What data do we have to back up the fact that we need to do this or we need to do that?”...These types of questions are utilized during the conversations he has with his teachers in the building. Carl thinks the special education perspective places a unique twist in the way in which principals think. Carl only has 24 staff members in his building; therefore, he feels that this allows for personalization and a chance for him to get to know everyone on an individual level.

Jason

Jason is currently the elementary principal of a 3-5 grade building in a rural community. In addition, he is also the English Language Learner (ELL) and Talented and Gifted (TAG) Coordinator for the school district along with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), Section 504 Coordinator in his building. Due to declining enrollment, this year the school district cut the curriculum director position, so his superintendent is now overseeing that role.

Jason grew up and attended school in a rural setting; consequently, he finds himself more comfortable in a smaller environment. Jason's teaching career path started in elementary education. When he was completing his required practicum work, he was discouraged to go into education by an elementary teacher with whom he had worked. That teacher told Jason that the hours were very long and that the compensation was poor in light of the investment of his time, so Jason withdrew from employment in formal education.

Jason went a different avenue and over time realized that he wanted to work with adolescents. He took a nontraditional route and started coaching and fell in love with education again, went back to college, and obtained a teaching degree. Jason taught language arts for four years at the secondary level. He also sponsored the school's yearbook, taught driver's education, and coached multiple sports at the secondary level. During his fourth year in a rural setting, Jason became the at-risk coordinator, and soon he began to think about becoming an administrator.

Jason then applied to an administrative program at a college in an urban setting and was accepted. He and his wife moved to be closer to the college for his administrative program. Jason spent the next two years teaching special education in a

suburban setting while finishing up his administrative program. The following year Jason became a principal in a rural school setting one hour away from his home. Jason's building serves 300 students in grades 3-5. Jason shared that he needed to conduct a considerable amount of research on his own to sharpen his skills be a stronger leader.

Jason shared that he is trying to balance two big concerns as a novice, rural principal. Firstly, he drives one hour, one way, to his school each day. He shared that living far from his school has been a challenge, especially when he has evening activities. He said that he wants and knows he needs to connect with the community, yet he needs to get home and get a good night's rest for the next school day. Additionally, Jason shared that he does not feel he has strong support from his current superintendent. Jason's school has been known to have some severe student behaviors and he is feeling stretched. Jason's superintendent delegates a number of responsibilities to him and when he is in the midst of a crisis, the superintendent never seems to be available. Jason has experienced several emergencies this year and in each case, he was left to address them without his superintendent's guidance and support.

Tim

Tim is in his first year of serving as a principal in a PK-4 grade building. The school district serves students in three different small towns. Tim's elementary building is in one town and the secondary principal is in another town. Tim grew up in an urban setting and shared that his graduating class consisted of 525 students. He admits that he did not know over half of the students in his graduating class. He has already recognized the unique challenges inherent to serving as a principal in a rural community.

Tim graduated from a state university with a bachelor's degree in elementary education, and his first job was in a rural setting, where he taught third grade for three years. He and his wife wanted to get back to a certain area of the state, which afforded Tim the opportunity to teach third grade for a year and fifth grade for two years in a different rural setting that was closer to some suburban areas. During his last two years of teaching, Tim became a mentor teacher for the elementary school and decided to start his administrative program. At the end of the program he applied for the elementary principal position on a whim and was offered the position. Tim admitted that he never expected to have a principal job so soon. Tim knows he is very lucky to be serving as principal in a school that houses the same grade levels that he previously taught.

Tim entered into a rural setting that had undergone much strife five years prior to his arrival. Although these cuts and closures occurred some time ago, Tim learned quickly that there was still a significant amount of mistrust from his teaching staff and within the community. With declining enrollment, the school district had to cut twelve teachers, closed one of the school buildings in one town, and the conversation of consolidation with a neighboring school district was on the school board table multiple times. Tim now serves in a school district that educates students from three neighboring communities with buildings in two of the three towns. Tim did not grow up in a rural town, so this was a very foreign experience for him. He discovered that the three towns are always in constant competition. For example, he postulated that if one town got something for their school, then the other towns felt they should get something as well. Tim admits that he was not fully prepared for the political dynamics of the

communities; moreover, he had not previously realized how entrenched people could be in their small towns.

The school district did not consolidate, but instead they decided to share their superintendent between their school district and another school district about fifteen minutes away. This decision was reached right before Tim entered his new role; consequently, he ascertained from the onset that his staff was very unsettled with that notion in fear of losing their school district in the future. Financially, the school district is in much better shape than it was five years ago, but with continued declining enrollment, the concern is still prevalent. All of this information has had a significant impact on the manner in which Tim attempts to build trust as he navigates his role in the school, the community, and the district.

Amber

Amber is in her first year of service as a PK-1 principal. She has two schools to lead and the two schools are in the same town but five minutes away from each other. Between the two schools, Amber works with about 300 students. Amber finds herself leading two schools that are beginning to form a single school as the school district will be purchasing land within the next academic year and beginning the planning phase to build one PK-1 elementary school. With that in mind, Amber is keeping that information in the forefront as she tries to bring two teams of teachers extended between two buildings into one collaborative team.

Amber never planned to go into education. She began her college career in pre-law with the sole intent of working with social justice issues. When she was a child, Amber lived in poverty. Amber's mother was a teacher and her father was a cocaine

addict. She clearly remembers periods of having no electrical power, nor having any food in her house. Her dad confiscated much of the money her mother earned to purchase cocaine. School was a safe place for Amber, yet she never wanted to become a teacher because Amber's mom advised her against it. Amber found herself enjoying the classes that were closely tied to education and knew she wanted to make a difference. As she continued in her pursuit of a bachelor's degree, people close to Amber told her that she would be an amazing teacher. After much reflection, she decided to complete the teacher education program and was pleased she made the switch.

She knew she wanted to work in a school attended by students living in poverty, so she could personally impact them in a positive way. Amber was hired in a suburban school district and taught kindergarten and fourth grade for the next 7 years. She was then approached by several colleagues to apply for the teacher leader position in her school district. Amber never saw herself as a leader, but she quickly learned that her colleagues did. Amber applied, interviewed, and was hired as a teacher leader for the same school district serving students and teachers in grades K-5 for seven years. During the time working as a teacher leader, Amber was approached again by her administrator and other colleagues telling her that she should go back to school and become a principal. Amber was accepted into a principal preparation program in a college in her town and joined a cohort of new colleagues. She enjoyed the program very much and built strong relationships with her classmates. During the interview, Amber shared that she remains in close contact with a few of her cohort members; moreover, one member communicates with her on a daily basis and they both are new administrators in neighboring school districts.

Amber is married and has several children. Amber and her husband live fifteen minutes away, in a different community. The oldest children have been attending in the educational system where she resides, while her youngest child just started school. Amber decided to enroll her youngest child in the school system where she now works. She felt that this very important decision effectively exemplified her commitment to the schools and the communities wherein she serves; proud enough to have her own child attend even though they live in another community. Amber felt this was a critical move because she now works in a rural setting. She has already gathered that people are closely observing her and her actions.

All of the principals were challenged by the smaller scale of their schools and the surrounding communities, and how these factors impacted their role when building relationships within the district. The size of their organizations created increased, overlapping responsibilities, time-management issues, and accountability concerns that played a significant part in their role. They were also constrained by current financial and resource conditions that impacted their organizations' identities and faculty's perceptions of their roles as leaders. In response to research question one, the forthcoming sections titled Instructional Leadership Practices, Communication and Relationships, and Developing Others address how the novice, rural principals described instructional leadership concepts as most important to their emerging practices as school leaders.

Instructional Leadership Practices

Overwhelmingly, the novice principals described instructional coaching and supporting teachers' growth as their main goal in the early stages of their tenures. They each described different approaches to achieving these goals including using communication to develop relationships, developing the knowledge and skills of teachers, and accountability for performance. In some sections, data was included in the findings that comprised a unanimous response from all twelve principals and noted accordingly. In other cases, I included specific number of principals that shared common perspectives. I included these specific counts in the findings to ensure a higher level of analytical rigor and trustworthiness. All of the novice, rural principals valued knowing their teachers' strengths and weaknesses, how data can shape instruction, and how instructional supervision conversations with teachers were vital to moving their school forward. As new principals, they each emphasized how they intended to be closely involved in instructional improvement in their schools, and how they worked to establish themselves as instructional leaders. All of the twelve novice, rural principals shared what a responsibility it was to be the person accountable for the direction in which one's school is heading.

Communication and Relationships

All of the novice, rural principals shared that in order to be an effective instructional leader, they must have good communication skills and positive relationships with their staff. These early career principals expressed a keen awareness of their communication styles, and how they were developing their skills to achieve their leadership goals. Each of the principals described linking their styles and modes of

communication to their desires to be open, transparent leaders who can initiate and maintain honest dialogue with their teachers. Jonathan stated:

Empathy and compassion for your colleagues is needed. I think a good instructional leader can have great conversations with somebody and is able to coach them and help them. A good communicator looks at people for the great qualities they have then tries to help them through the challenges they face on a continual basis.

Jonathan made sense of his conversations with his staff to assist in coaching them as an instructional leader. He was keenly aware of his need to be an effective communicator.

Kevin felt he fostered collaborative leadership and accomplished it by building relationships one staff member at a time. He believed that relationships were his number one priority. He hoped his staff would say that Kevin generally cared far more about them than their test scores. Kevin shared that he would continually ask questions about their classrooms, what they did over the weekend, and about their nuclear and extended families. Kevin also spoke about having opportunities for staff members to get together both at school and outside of school. Kevin shared:

I think getting the staff together for Christmas parties, gatherings, beginning of the year parties, end of the year parties, to allow them to just have conversations between each other. I think once you build that relationship between each other, then there's a sense of trust when it comes down to each grade level team. If you enjoy being around each other, you have a better chance of those individuals asking for help. Building trust is essential any way you can.

Kevin was making sense of his staff's needs and assisting as an instructional leader to help orchestrate various relationship building activities.

Samantha took her role as instructional leader very seriously, as is evidenced by her description of how she aspired to work with teachers on their instructional practices, steered them toward best practices, and heightened their overall effectiveness. Samantha shared, "Instructional leadership is helping people see and learn about the best ways of helping kids be successful learners." Samuel echoed this sentiment by making sense of his responsibility as the principal when he stated:

It [instructional leadership] is my sole responsibility in making sure things happen at my building level. I think that carries into everything I do. Planning meaningful professional development for the year so the teachers are making improvements, having quality evaluations, having tough conversations with teachers, challenging them, and letting them know it's okay to fail, and if you're not failing, you're not trying new things.

Samuel accepted the responsibilities of being a principal and is making sense of his role in serving as an instructional leader.

Amber, a first-year principal, shared how important being an instructional leader was, yet how difficult it is. She shared:

Instructional leadership is huge to me. Without instructional leaders in the building, I don't feel like we can promise high quality education that we need for our students. I feel like every day we have to make a choice; whether to be a manager or an instructional leader. It is so easy to get sucked into the managerial things. I have to walk the walk. I have to be there when the kids are melting

down. I almost have a visual in my head of somebody holding hands with somebody else and walking forward together. The idea that we are all learners together. As an instructional leader, I am going to be right beside that person. We're going to learn together. With that said, I might choose to be a manager because you can't be a leader until the things are managed well. It is a very hard balance.

Amber is clearly making sense of the impact of trying to balance the role of management versus instructional leadership and feels the pull each day at work.

It was shared by all 12 of the novice, rural principals that an instructional leader has an understanding of where their schools are and where their schools need to go. Jonathan, a third-year principal, expressed his instructional leadership actions. He focused on data-driven instructional improvement and accountability for student learning outcomes as a means to work with teachers on their teaching skills. He approached his leadership as a facilitator helping teachers understand their practices in terms of data outcome. Jonathan emphasized how it is his role to work with teachers on solutions and changes to improve student learning. He also shared how much he has learned and changed over the first few years as an instructional leader and admitted to his own growth mindset. Although Jonathan's reflection was well articulated, he lacked in the depth of the reflection and struggled making sense of his leadership practices.

Jonathan shared:

The changes that happen in the school are going to revolve around me as the instructional leader. I'm the one that drives the change and what my expectations are. If I take a backseat, and I'm not showing what those expectations are or

modeling those expectations, that's where there's a disconnect. I take more ownership in this school than I ever have. This is my school, and this is the direction we are going. You've given me the mission as a lead learning team, then I need to make sure everybody's following that mission and that goal.

Jonathan tried to make sense of his role as an instructional leader and the great responsibility he has to lead his staff in the direction that aligns with the district.

Another skill that Kevin has learned is how to make his building consistent throughout in their work. He saw the benefit of using the same terminology in the classroom with students. Kevin shared how he makes sense of making instructional terminology consistent and asked himself the following questions:

When I go into meetings, I asked the teachers, "Are the students feeling the same thing? Are the students understanding what they're doing, and why they're doing what they're doing and the purpose for it?" I think that comes down to consistency through grade level to grade level. That is what I am trying to build is consistency in a teamwork philosophy and remembering the growth mindset between the different grade levels.

Kevin shared that as an instructional leader his biggest surprise has been how different issues have an emotional impact. He made sense of his role and realized that many hard decisions have to be made based on logic and what he sees in the building. He realized quickly that when working very closely with the staff, and when leading people, the emotional side plays a significant role.

Kevin felt this has been his biggest challenge thus far, understanding how decisions he must make are going to impact people. This also encompasses feeling

confident in what one is doing as being the best for one's students and their learning. Kevin shared that this is more difficult when a principal knows that his or her staff is passionate about something. He admitted that he struggled with decision making most often when emotionality played into the expectation.

Carl focused on three guiding factors as an instructional leader that not only dug into school improvement but also into school culture. His three guiding factors included creating a safe and caring learning environment, providing a viable curriculum, and offering competent instruction. Carl sensed that his background in special education and differentiated instruction had helped him as an instructional leader.

When he met with his Professional Learning Community (PLC) he asked them similar questions to those he had posed when he was a special education teacher. Carl asked questions such as, "Why are we making these instructional decisions?", "What is guiding us to do that?", and "What data do we have to back up the fact that we need to do this or we need to do that?" Carl clearly felt that being a special education teacher before becoming a principal helped shape the way he thinks. When reflecting on how this training has guided his thinking as an instructional leader, Carl shared:

Now I am asked to wear a different hat and make executive decisions about what we're doing and what we're teaching. The scope and sequence of some of those things that I never have actually thought about before is demanding. It's definitely made me think and process what we're doing, and how we're doing it in a different way. It's been a pleasant journey so far.

Carl was making sense that his former role as a special education teacher shaped his thinking as he transitioned into his new role as a principal.

Tim shared that his transition as an instructional leader has been positive and felt a big part of his success was his reliance on his principal training cohort and his mentors. He said that he calls upon them often. Tim especially felt this was important since he is a principal in a very small school out in the middle of nowhere. He felt that his cohort and mentors are a strong support system as his other principal colleagues that are also serving as small school principals.

As an instructional leader, Tim believed he could not have a significant impact without building positive relationships in the building. In the past, the school district had gone through reduction of force situations thus causing much strife and loss of trust. Tim understood that in order to have an effective professional development program he needed to build positive relations with his staff and the community members.

A second goal Tim had established was to focus on the development of the teacher leadership in the building. He had multiple questions he asked of his teachers, and he understood that his role was to direct those teachers to ultimately improve student achievement. Tim also shared that he made a big assumption. He thought that every classroom ran like his classroom did as a teacher. He quickly learned that this was not always the case. That was something that he did not expect to experience, but he learned that during his first year as a principal to help guide the direction of the school.

Anne admitted that being an instructional leader can be very difficult. She is serving in a building that has had three principals in three years so the staff is not very trusting. She realized that building relationships and dealing with student behavioral issues needed to be her priority in order to build trust. Anne shared her perspective on her role as an instructional leader:

Honestly, a lot of my focus has been on improving building culture, and improving the student behaviors that have been kind of allowed, so to speak, over the past three to four years. So, instructional leadership wise, I didn't even think about it until second semester of my first year. Once I took time to think about it, I finally feel like I fully understand where we're going professional development wise, and what we're doing. It took a long time to jump into what they have been doing during the last few years with professional development and instructional leadership. The first year was a huge transition trying to understand and work out the kinks.

Anne admitted to making many mental notes as she navigated through her first year as a principal and an instructional leader. She said she kept ruminating in her head, next year I would like to try this, next year I need to change that, and so on and so forth. All along she reflected and made sense of how she has to continue to have a significant number of informal conversations with staff to continue to grow as a school. Anne admitted that she feels far more confident starting her second year as principal.

Sarah, a first year, novice rural principal focused on coaching and working with her teachers from where they were and where she saw them transitioning to. She emphasized how she focused on growth-minded instructional practices. Although this is a common practice for principals, the depth of the reflection was weak, and I gathered this is because she is just ending her first year as a principal.

From information gathered from the second and third years' principals, instructional leadership reflection increases over time. Sarah explained:

Instructional leadership is about how we move our school forward. We just go from where our teachers are, meet them where they are, and then strive to continue to push them so we can gather more data and help these kids grow a little bit more. It means inspiring them to want to do more, learn more, be more. Constantly leading them in the right direction. Growth mindset.

Sarah used sensemaking to process her instructional leadership role in moving the school forward. She sees the value in understanding where her teachers are instructionally and what they strive to achieve.

Anne shared her view on making sense of the responsibility of developing others and building relationships:

It's stressful because you have all these people here, and you want to connect with all of them and support them all where they are, but also find a way to push them toward your goals as a building. "There are times where I can't really tell who's on board and who's not. I find that in just sharing with them they tell me that a certain person is kind of hard to work with. So, I need to make an extra effort with some of those people, and I am not sure if it's just their personality, or if there is something that I can be doing better to get to know them better."

Anne was reflecting and making sense of her role as a principal and instructional leader in building community.

For Catherine, she described her approach as being honest and blunt while being respectful. This approach, as she described it, is framed by high expectations and follow through in order to initiate changes in teachers' practices. Instructional leadership is something that develops over time in the building, developing relationships with one's

staff and on-the-job experience. When asked about her instructional priorities, Catherine, a second-year principal, admitted:

Maybe I am not the best at instructional leadership. I consider the leadership that I have to be more of a 'lead by example' approach. I try to provide background and understanding about things. I don't know. I don't know that I do very well at that. An instructional leader models through their leadership and helps people through situations and helps them to understand their challenges and how they can improve.

Catherine used sensemaking to reflect that perhaps instructional leadership is not her strength. She is making sense of what she must do to be an effective instructional leader.

The principals were in the midst of establishing their authority as leaders and setting expectations among their faculty and staff. They each expressed different approaches to balancing aspects of leadership communication that establish supportive climates and cultures paired with accountability and expectations for teacher growth. Many have found success in this area by building trust and relationships with the students and staff. This is critical in their roles as instructional leaders since developing this trust ultimately improves the climate and culture of the school.

Developing Others

The expectation to develop others was taken very seriously by the novice, rural principals and in most cases, they felt this was their most important role as an educational leader. Each principal shared that building relationships was essential in order to develop their teachers by having personal conversations about their teachers' teaching practices and how they could improve.

Samuel, a second-year principal, explained the balance between coaching teachers regarding their instructional improvement and developing school-wide capacity for improvement as a way to create momentum among the faculty. He described his instructional leadership in more holistic terms, in the manner in which it affects both teachers and students. He stated:

One of my goals for my staff is to continue to learn and grow and make changes and just try not to become idle. Trying new things, doing different trends and not being scared to try new things. I feel like I can do these things because of the leadership we have in our school.

Samuel also described communication as vital to his leadership practices, particularly the balance of when to be firm and direct versus warm and supportive with a teacher. Although he described different situations when he was able to use either approach, he shared conversations about instruction offering a distinct reflection on his communication style. He wrestled with the tenets of collaborative practice and setting expectations he knew should be met. In addition, Samuel was one of seven novice, rural principals who talked about needing a willingness to let one's staff take risks and encourage them to grow. Samuel shared: "I think that's probably the scariest thing [developing others]. I think it's a scary thing to know that ultimately, it's up to you to set your building and teachers up for success."

Samuel used sensemaking as he thought about what a responsibility it is to lead and develop his staff. He understands the significance and impact he has on their growth as teachers.

Samantha emphasized the listening part of her communication approach, particularly for the purposes of generating information that she could use to develop leadership plans and establish closer relationships with her faculty. A portion of the issues she identified centered on transparency and trust between the faculty and the administration. As she explained:

It's scary. It's really scary because I also take it personally when people don't grow. I have those conversations with myself all the time. When I have a bad situation, I always reflect on how could I have approached that better. How could I have handled that better? It's daunting.

Samantha made sense of the impact she has on her staff and helping them grow. She found reflecting on her conversations was important in improving the communication with and guidance of her staff.

Sarah shared, "Letting them [staff] know it's okay to take risks and know that they're going to fail" is understanding the value of professional development. She deemed developing others in the educational field to be an integral part of the principal's job. Eight of the novice principals shared that one of their most important roles was developing others. "It's a pretty daunting thing," offered Madeline. Sarah stated, "You know, when I think about it [developing others] and truly reflect on it, I am so pumped. It makes me just super excited."

Sarah and Madeline are making sense of their role as a leader developing others. It is a primary and challenging part of the principals' job. Sarah admitted it is an intimidating process, but it also makes her excited to see what an impact she can have in the development of others.

Samantha stated:

I think that's [developing others] my most important role, and that's one of the things that I really enjoy about my job. One of my strengths, I think, is being able to see other people's strengths, and be able to help them build on those strengths. There is always good in everybody.

Similarly, Amber shared that her main role as a principal is in building relationships and developing others. She stated:

I think developing others is my main role. I feel like that's my job with every single one of my teachers. I'm struggling more with my associates, because there's just so many and not enough time. I've been able to build some relationships a little bit and help grow alongside them. I need to figure out where they're at and help them grow, and I feel like that's one of my roles. My impact is probably more than they have even with their kids. Hopefully, I'm impacting our kids that way. I feel personal ownership over that.

Amber is making sense of the large responsibility of building relationships with the adults, and how it ultimately impacts her staff and students.

Developing skills in others is a large part of what a principal does. The novice, rural principals were expected to see things that others could not, guide their teachers by displaying strong skills, and develop their staff into more effective teachers. This included principals having deep conversations with their teachers and support staff to enhance their instructional practices. Numerous coaching opportunities arise throughout the school year. In response, novice, rural principals need to recall the information they have learned during their principal preparation courses and apply those skills to their

interactions with adults during difficult conversations. Principals are expected to be strong leaders by building capacity in their school community. They must guide teachers to a personal learning level the teacher may not be able to achieve on their own. Sarah shared:

I feel like my job is to build capacity within the building. I tap into their strengths, and then continue to make them grow. I feel like I am always trying to help them grow professionally, even if that means sharing little strategies, websites, tools or resources that I can help them with.

Sarah understood the impact she has as a leader and makes sense of her instructional leadership role of helping her staff grow professionally. Carl agreed and reflected on his role of developing others. He shared:

I'm the leader. Developing people is probably the most critical part of the job. I can't just come in and say, "Well, we have X amount of staff members, they just don't fit the bill. Let's get rid of them and start all over and rehire people." That's just not the way it is. Developing that communication, that trust with your staff so that they can feel like there is an open-door policy, and they can come to you with concerns and such they have in my school. My role is to also help people identify with their Individual Career Development plans, identifying areas that they really need to work on, and being able to have conversations with those staff members. I take this very seriously and personally. I think it's important that the staff know that I care about them.

Carl made sense of his role as the leader in the school, and how he approached working with his staff while building relationships and developing others.

Carl, Tim, Kevin, Amber, and Anne all suggested developing others is probably the most critical part of their job. Through an open-door policy of enhancing communication and building trust, the information necessary to develop an effective professional development plan can be gained. The five principals also shared that participating as a facilitator of professional development created visible and transparent instructional leadership.

Honesty is another area that Kevin postulated as critical in developing others. As an instructional leader who evaluates teacher performance, he must be able to give honest feedback to guide teacher growth. He shared:

If I am truly going to impact student learning and impact the way a teacher teaches, I have to be honest with them about what I see in their classroom when I conduct walkthroughs, and when I do formal observations. When I sit down with them, I need to look them in the eye. I need to be honest with them. I have had really good feedback doing this. My staff greatly appreciates my honesty. I'm making an impact with students when I give honest information. I do have a sense of impact when it comes down to students. As a teacher, you impact the students so much. As an administrator, I am not directly teaching them, but I do impact them through the teachers. I do have a sense of accomplishment when I have those tough conversations because essentially, I am impacting students. I am impacting the people that are impacting the students directly. I'm impacting student learning indirectly.

Kevin used sensemaking in understanding his instructional leadership to develop others role as an evaluator by reflecting on the impact he makes on a daily basis.

Catherine, the novice, rural principal who feels she does not embody strong instructional leadership well shared how she felt her role was in developing others. Catherine felt as if she bears much of the burden herself; therefore, she feels she always needs to be successful. Catherine shared:

I take it that if they [staff] aren't successful that's a reflection of me. I think that you always need to have an open-door approach in order to allow people to come to you. As an administrator, I can set the tone of a building really quick, morale needs to be high and boosted quite often.

Catherine shared how she is making sense of her responsibility, and how ultimately the growth and success of her staff is a reflection of her leadership.

Jonathan echoed this sentiment and felt that a large part of his role is in developing others, yet he thought he received little training in this area during his principal preparation coursework. Jonathan stated:

I continue to challenge [developing others]. Continuing to push is my responsibility, and I am okay with that. I'm fine with the tough questions and the tough conversations. I ask myself how I can help motivate them [staff] to continue to get better. We expect our kids to learn, but we don't expect the same for ourselves? Not under my leadership. As a principal, you must be a good listener to show you're a strong communicator. I was a communication studies major in college, and I truly believe in communicating well, but I think one of the things I've learned is everybody communicates differently and finding a way to communicate at different levels is really important. It's about the relationships

that you build and having conversations with people. You have to be very cognizant of what you're doing, and how you get your message out.

Although each of the principals were able to answer questions regarding how they have interpreted their role as an instructional leader, they were all challenged to go deeper as they reflected on their role as instructional leaders. It was evident by their non-verbal actions during the interviews that they know they should be focusing on instructional leadership, yet the day-to-day managerial tasks get in the way and take precedent in their role. Instructional improvement efforts were mentioned specifically by nine novice, rural principals. They all talked about learning along with their staff during professional development. Jonathan shared that one of his goals was challenging his teachers to do things differently and re-thinking the way teachers are engaging their students in their learning. Sarah shared one of her many challenges in being an instructional leader in her new building and role:

I have to take baby steps with the staff. I've really learned to kind of back off a little because I was going full force when I first started and making some changes [with instruction], and I don't know if it was always received well, so I'm trying to kind of take a step back a little bit.

Sarah recognized her role in developing others and made sense of how critical it was to go slow to move fast in setting the tone and placing instructional expectations on her teachers.

In a variety of sensemaking situations, there are both similar and differing expectations on the novice, rural principals. For instance, six of twelve of the principals shared that they spend extra time in specific classrooms where behaviors are more

prevalent. Having the students and staff see the principal in classrooms helps build positive relationships, so when discipline needs to occur, a relationship and trust is already built. This was their role in developing others and working in the best interests of their students.

Accountability

Several of the novice, rural principals shared that they had many surprises in their new role as an instructional leader. The notion of accountability came up many times during the interviews. The novice principals expressed that they feel a great sense of pressure on how well their schools perform on state assessments. The perception is if their student assessment scores do not improve each year, they will be pressured by the school board and community. They know that their ultimate role as an instructional leader is to improve student achievement, and that every decision they make in their building is geared toward improving student achievement. The pressure is high and real.

Madeline stated:

I think the most surprising is the accountability that I feel. I think it's surprising because I didn't realize how huge that pressure would be in today's education. I think the biggest challenge that I have is I have to do it all when it comes to parents and student's problems, or...either it's instructional problems with students or behavior or attendance. It all falls on my shoulders.

Public schools are rated by how well they produce successful students and success in education is determined by how many students are proficient by reviewing data. The pressure is extreme and something that the novice principals were not necessarily prepared for. The principals recall talking about increasing student achievement in their

principal preparation coursework, yet they did not have specific instruction in how to actually improve student achievement. In some cases, the novice principals shared that student behaviors in their school are so severe that they are impacting the school culture. Therefore, developing the management procedures and impacting the school culture took precedence. Until this was addressed, significant student achievement would not occur.

Samuel stated:

When you look at our accountability, it is scary. Everything is public. This is where we live; in a “fishbowl.” Your scores are public, everything is published in the paper. If you’re not doing good enough, whether it’s coming back to the school board, or you’re a school in need of assistance, or you’re this or that designation, you’re the one. You feel like you’re the one responsible for that.

Samuel shared how he makes sense of the accountability of his actions as a building principal, and how transparency affects how he is perceived by the community.

Incorporating Professional Learning Communities (PLC) was also shared by Jonathan, Sarah, Tim, Amber, and Anne as an instructional improvement area. Anne shared her perspective on how she made sense on how Professional Learning Communities (PLC) work in her building:

We know that just because we send you to the PLC conference, or we have conversations about PLC doesn’t mean that it just happens. It’s a learning process for everybody, so we’ve been working on that. We spend a lot of time with our data structure, trying to figure out what that looks like and what those meetings look like. I have changed the structure. I think this was our third change this year

in what that looks like because my staff has not.... they're still learning how to have the right conversations.

Jonathan shared how he looks at student data to improve instruction and ultimately improve student achievement. Instead of looking at it from the lens of actual student test scores, Jonathan looks at the systems in place to see how they can be enhanced to ultimately improve student achievement by stating:

We're going to look at data, how do we change instruction? We need to make sure our PLC's [Professional Learning Communities] are running effectively, and we're using the data to really affect our instruction in a positive way. I don't think our parents want us to be mediocre. I think they want their kids to have the best education they can have. We are accountable for this.

The conversation continued with accountability at the forefront and making sense of it all. Samuel shared his concern with what he was doing, while questioning if it is enough. Samuel continued by stating:

Not only are our scores public, but I'm evaluating the building and the teachers on that same level. Was my PD [professional development] the right PD? Were the interventions the right interventions that we should have been doing for the students? If we could have done this different would it make a different level. I see it really similar, I think it's a little scarier thing. A lot scarier thing. Being at that level where ultimately, it's up to you to set your building and teachers up for the success.

Samuel is processing all he has to accomplish when being the leader of his building and teachers. He identifies that being the leader of the building places a huge responsibility on him. Carl is in agreement with Samuel. He stated:

I ask questions of the teachers during our PLC time. Why are we making these instructional decisions? What is guiding us to do that? What data do we have to back up the fact that we need to do this or we need to do that? Using our data to make decisions and then to share out our data is very important. I have to know where we were and where we need to go and all the steps in between and be able to speak about it confidently.

Carl made sense of the data that he has reviewed in his building and asked key questions. When one is a new principal one has to have a deep understanding of where one's building was in the past. What type of leader was present in the past? Did they take the same approach that the present principal plans to take to lead his or her building? Sarah shared how she made sense of the building responsibilities in that she took over a school that did not have much in the area of accountability by the former principal, and that created a challenge in her new role. She shared:

I've realized that looking at some of the data and thought, how do we move our school forward? We need to gather more data and help these kids grow a little bit more. That means more collaborative planning and really digging deeper into the data.

Accountability can also be seen in a different way as Samantha shared a conversation she had with a parent about their child:

Some of this is going to be difficult for them [student]. We have to hold students accountable. Yeah, they [student] may not get to play in Friday night's game because they did something stupid during the week, but that's a small consequence if they learn the lesson. You don't want them to have it be life altering and missing a game is not life altering.

As a principal, you are expected to have tough conversations with various stakeholders and Samantha is making sense of the high accountability of those expectations.

In summary, the principals expressed a strong initial focus on instructional quality and teachers' professional growth as they began their tenures as principals. Their communication included feeling a strong burden to ultimately improve student achievement. They each described different approaches to their instructional leadership, and expressed that developing teachers' skills was a priority. While external accountability and other policy-driven mandates were not strong factors in their descriptions, they each valued professional accountability for growth, and how teachers' growth was essential to improving student learning. In order to achieve their instructional leadership goals, the principals described how they also prioritized their communication skills.

Challenges

Multiple challenges were shared by the participants. Some of the challenges were expected, yet many of them were not. Five of the twelve participants were former special education teachers and they felt that having that background helped them greatly in the transition as a novice principal. The other seven participants did not have a background

in special education and relied on their principal preparation program information to assist them and learned very quickly that the information they learned in coursework was not enough, thus causing them difficulties in their new role.

Special Education

The area of special education knowledge and expertise needed to run a school effectively was shared during the interviews. The novice, rural principals shared that the majority of their time during the school day was addressing students with various disabilities. Learning how to address students with behavioral challenges was brought up on several occasions during the interview process. The concerns shared were that the novice principals did not feel prepared when dealing with students with behavioral challenges. Of the twelve interviewed, five of the novice, rural principals were formally special education teachers. The remaining seven novice, rural principals interviewed did not have any special education experience prior to becoming a principal and all seven shared that this was a concern when leading a school.

As former special education teachers, Catherine, Samantha, Kevin, Carl, and Jason specifically talked about instructional improvement in the area of aligning their instruction with the assessments. They all felt more prepared as former special education teachers in addressing student behaviors in their buildings. They knew structure and procedures would ultimately support improved student achievement.

These former special education teachers talked about using their professional development time with the teachers to address their schools' reading and math scores at the elementary level. At the high school level, they talked about using data to make

decisions for better instruction, similar to amending student Individual Education Plans (IEP).

Addressing early literacy was at the forefront of Kevin and Carl's mind, and they shared how they continue to personalize and individualize learning as much as possible. Carl specifically talked about reviewing their elementary reading series to align it with the curriculum. All were aware that they have lofty goals and feel that they can be met over the next three years.

Amber shared that she felt unprepared to deal with all the special education issues that have occurred in her building. She is shocked at the amount of time the special education students are taking and that because of their needs, she is unable to be visible in classrooms. She shared:

I really feel unprepared for special education issues. I only had one special education law class, and we went over court cases, not learning how to deal with students with behavioral and special needs. I don't feel competent enough to make some big decisions. Living in our rural community, we don't have a special education director; our superintendent is fulfilling that role, and he is doing fine, but I am calling him all the time with these behavioral issues we are experiencing. I have so many questions every day, like can I restrain a student that is under evaluation if he is biting adults? What happens when the student starts to run outside, can I grab him to not run into the street? I feel so accountable and don't want to make a mistake. I don't want to be that lawsuit that they talk about forever, that happened on my first year of being a principal. I need so much more training on how to deal with special education issues.

Amber is making sense of all the responsibility she has in making big decisions, yet feels incompetent in making some because of a lack of special education training in her graduate program.

Many times, the principal has to be the person to manage emergency behavior situations. When a special education behavior disordered student loses emotional control, this can result in a need for principal intervention, student management, parent contact, IEP Behavior Intervention Plan review, and on and on. At times, these Special Education student management issues can take 3-4 hours to resolve, completely disrupting the principal's day, setting them behind on other priorities, and causing them to miss scheduled events with other staff. Creating processes and procedures as well as developing skills in managing special education behavior is vital in the ability to create time to focus on other priorities like instructional leadership.

Non-special Education Student Behavior

The majority of the principals shared that they were surprised by the amount of time they were pulled to deal with non-special education student behavior in the classroom. Many found that these students were also struggling learners but instead chose to display inappropriate behavior to gain attention. These students were highly distractible to the classroom setting and often disrupted the other students' opportunity to learn. Because of this, the novice, rural principal was asked to intervene.

Carl shared that one of his surprises as an instructional leader was the amount of time he has dealt with student behavior issues. He shared that was a focus area for him and hoped that once the behaviors settled down with creating consistent language throughout, then student achievement will ultimately improve. He shared that because

his school is so small, not only do they screen students in the fall, winter and spring for reading, but they can also progress monitor every student every week. He really wants to focus on instructional change in his building, but in his initial year, student behavior concerns were predominating. Carl made sense of his role as an instructional leader by sharing:

I believe that the instructional leader is that person that really sets the tone and really creates high standards for student achievement, and isn't afraid to ask those challenging questions to staff members when things aren't going as well as we'd like; when we need to see some change, what do we need to do differently. That person that's constantly posing those questions and constantly challenging the staff.

Jason shared that his instructional leadership had not been strong in his initial year; likewise, he offered that his school has had a significant number of student behavioral issues. Additionally, increased behavioral issues associated with new students entering the school district and past students returning from placement have put a strain on his instructional leadership opportunities. He admitted that he was grateful for his past experience as a behavioral interventionist and did not see how anyone without this background could be successful when responsible for the oversight of all student behavioral concerns. Jason admitted that he is barely staying afloat with all of the significant student behavioral issues.

Jason shared more deeply that he knew an area for instructional improvement would be addressing his school behavioral concerns. He specifically talked about adopting Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) and creating a common

language for the school with common expectations from classroom to classroom. He then hopes to conduct training on its gradual release; thereby officially impacting yet another area for improvement in his school, which he hopes will underscore the school's philosophy on what instruction should look like.

Jason disclosed that he has a very good instructional coach in his building and that he has appreciated all that this trained professional has done to help the building run smoothly when he has been responding to student behaviors. Jason shared that even though he felt as if his instructional leadership was lacking this year, he knows it is his responsibility to create a common vision with his staff, students, and the community so they are on the same page. He is hopeful that once the behavioral issues are under control, he can focus on instruction and the staff can go through more extensive training in that arena.

Jason also admitted that he was not as organized as he should have been when he started in this new role. He found himself frequently out of his office due to dealing with extreme student behaviors; thus, he acknowledged that his communication to staff was adversely affected. He found that staff were coming back to him asking if he had received their communication and what his decision was in numerous areas. Consequently, he felt he was not supporting all staff needs due to his focus on student behavioral issues. At the start of second semester of the previous academic year, Jason realized he needed to get a grasp on his organizational skills; therefore, among other things, he designed an improved communication system. He created a system that could serve to streamline communications between himself and his staff. In doing so he

noticed that school climate was positively impacted and markedly improved once the system was adopted.

Student behavioral concerns were also at the top of the list of challenges identified by Carl, Jason, Kevin, Amber, and Anne. They all knew they would experience some student behavior issues, but did not realize the extent to which student behaviors would commandeer their time. They often expressed shock at the extreme student behaviors they experienced. They quickly realized there were some building-wide trainings that would be invaluable to teachers, yet found it challenging to find the time with all of the other district initiatives already enacted. Jason revealed that he was exhausted by the extent of the challenging behaviors:

I knew one of the big challenges would be student behaviors. I didn't anticipate it being this tough. I didn't think I'd be intervening behavior for three hours every day; helping with time out situations and things like that. I've had to be more intentional about getting into classrooms to complete my expected walkthroughs. This is not easy. A lot of people in the teaching profession didn't grow up in a high poverty household. So, I need to shift their thinking a little bit and have them understand that we need to teach our students the same expectations and use the same language. Over time this should help lessen student behaviors.

Jason continued to try and make sense of the extreme student behaviors and the time it took from his day and the other students he needed to serve. He was reflecting on how he could change things systematically.

Non-special education student behavior was an area that concerned all novice, rural principals interviewed in this study. Through their school experiences, these students have not been identified as special education students with behavior disorders, but continue to create behavior concerns in the school setting. The novice principals shared that they needed more training in behavior management and more training in how to assist their teachers in addressing student behavior concerns.

Management Responsibilities

Leading a school as a principal is a new level of responsibility. Not many are trained to do it. As principals' transition from being an assistant principal, dean of students, or a teacher, many challenges present themselves. An added challenge is that they are immediately expected to have the skills of an experienced principal to address these concerns. Most challenges that come across the novice principal's desk are issues that the novice principal has not previously been responsible for. Having a strong mentor can sometimes help the novice principal navigate through the various challenges. They must make decisions to determine which task is the one to tackle first, second, third, and so forth.

A variety of challenges as an instructional leader were mentioned by all twelve novice, rural principals. Madeline shared her biggest challenge:

I think the biggest challenge are the students we have today in our schools. I hate to say it.... some of them just don't care. It's like, "Oh well, I'll hand that in late" ...I think motivating students is the biggest challenge, I really do.

Madeline also made sense of her leadership and shared that another test was the shift from being an assistant principal to the head principal and all the moving

pieces. There were many decisions she had never been responsible for, yet they immediately became her decisions to make. She shared that there was so much of the instructional parts that she did not know, realize, or understand. She admitted that it was difficult.

Madeline stated:

That's something [new curriculum areas] I had to learn about and make sure I understood the terms and what we needed. There's a lot there that I didn't know, and I think that was the hardest transition, to learn all those things. I'm one that wants to read about it and learn about it on my own. I don't like to call somebody and ask, "Can you explain this to me?"

Kevin and Anne shared that one of their biggest challenges was to build trust with their staff because they walked into buildings with significant turnover involving administration. They both considered themselves very flexible people, yet they could not imagine what it would be like to work under different leadership each year for multiple years in a row. They both recognized that challenge, so they kept that in mind as they held conversations with staff. Anne shared her challenges:

There is an overwhelming amount of stuff to get done, you're learning parents, you're learning kids, you're learning staff, you're trying to honor the culture of the building that has been there so far, but also trying to bring your own spin into it without completely freaking people out.

Anne made sense of the uniqueness of this role, and how she needed to navigate a variety of demands. To complicate this navigation, being new to the role trust had not

been firmly established, so people questioned why she was responding the way she was even when she knew her actions were right for the school.

Samuel, Madeline, and Amber agreed that another challenge of transitioning into the role of building principal would be the logistics of getting into the classrooms. They thought visiting classrooms would be an easy priority to fulfill, and they were making sense of the significant instructional leadership responsibility they had as a building principal. What they learned was that while visiting classrooms was a priority, it demanded much time. The principals know it is critical to get into classrooms to gauge the effectiveness of the learning culture. The novice, rural principals talked about conducting walkthroughs as often as possible and how that concept is much easier said than done due to their breadth of job responsibilities.

Carl and Tim were challenged by the amount of duties they needed to fulfill in a given day. Carl shared:

I didn't expect to be spread as thin as I am. That has been a challenge. I knew it was going to be a lot, but never planned for this. I walked into [the] building without some structures in place so I have all these office referrals, bus referrals, and all these different things in different areas, and I can't help but think some of it can be avoided by speaking a common language and having common expectations.

Carl was making sense of what his building needed similarly to the way Jason had. In both cases, they understood the demand of the breadth of their responsibilities, and how these obligations demanded time away from their primary role as an instructional improvement leader.

Tim explained that he knew transitioning into an administrative role was going to be a challenge, but admitted he was not quite expecting to conduct the difficult conversations right away. Tim shared:

I thought the biggest challenge was going to be transitioning from that teacher lens to the administrator lens, and knowing that making those tough decisions financially impact everyone involved. I've had some tough conversations my first year with different teachers. I called other administrators, asked them the steps they took and how they handled certain types of conversations. Having those difficult conversations has been hard, it's never easy, but I think having people to call on for support has really helped me.

Tim was making sense of his role when it came to challenging conversations and how leaning on other administrators or mentors can guide in that process.

Sarah was very quick to share her biggest challenge as she transitioned from a teacher to a principal. Sarah stated:

The big challenge that I had was dealing with people with mental health issues. I didn't think about that. I didn't think that would even be on my radar, and that has been...I feel like I'm passed that now, but the first half of the year I dealt with a lot of mental health issues with parents. So, I didn't feel like I was prepared for that.

Samantha, Sarah, Catherine, and Jonathan shared that another challenge was working with teachers that have been in the school for years and getting support from them.

Samantha stated:

One of my concerns going in was, here I am, a female, and going into an area where the head custodian and athletic director have been in the school since before I was born. I needed to get the support from them and try and work with them in a way that is professional even though everything I was trying to do in a positive direction was being sabotaged.

Samantha had learned that initiating various conversations in the building can be a challenge in itself. Strong instructional leaders know that building strong relationships with all stakeholders is essential to their success. Sarah shared:

One of the biggest challenges was coming in and just having conversations with different people. I had one grade level that was going to be a challenge. I would definitely say they have been a challenge this year, not just instructionally, but building relationships-wise, they're a little bit more closed-minded.

Sarah was making sense of the expectations that a principal has to build relationships, especially when long held building relations preceded her.

Catherine believed her biggest challenge would be working with the staff, "...just simply because I think any shift in leadership is a paradigm shift for them as well." Catherine was making sense of it encompassed to work with her staff. Jonathan echoed the same feeling when he stated:

There are a few of my teachers that haven't necessarily bought in to what we expect and that is a challenge. But I think the great part is that the positive people that understand the needed changes outweigh the negative teachers. The challenge is not to allow negative individuals to prevent us from accomplishing our goals and achieve needed improvements.

Jonathan was identifying that some of his teachers were not on board with what his leadership identified as needed improvements. Amber also recognized this notion and shared two main challenges; managing adults and balancing being a principal of two small elementary schools in a rural community. She shared:

I think managing adults instead of kids is hard. I try to be a coach, but I have realized already that adults change so much slower than little humans do. I knew this was going to be a battle coming in, but not this bad. Managing adults has been the hardest part. Because I am a principal in two different elementary schools, I find this to be a challenge. I drive myself between both buildings every day. I need to be where the needs are, and I find that I am never in the right building when issues arise. I can never be at each drop off and pick up each day to see the students and families and that is very hard. I feel disconnected most days. I have two different secretaries; one works with me and one is sabotaging everything I do. I have tried everything to get her to understand her role and nothing is working. I set up the year the correct way by taking the two secretaries out to lunch to learn about their strengths, their gifts and how they saw their daily roles. One conversation went the way I had hoped, the other was a disaster. I have never had a secretary before in my career, so this is new. I never had any training on how to deal with secretaries. Unfortunately, since the one secretary is sabotaging everything I am doing, I cannot trust her and delegate anything to her so nothing is getting done. I am having to be the secretary and principal in that building. I know I need to address this with her, but right now I am exhausted and frustrated and don't know how to even start the conversation.

Amber is making sense of her role in managing adults and serving students in two different school buildings. She is finding that this is a big challenge, one that she cannot continue to ignore.

Challenges are expected when one takes on a role of leading a school. There are surprises the novice principal is unprepared for, everything from the teaching culture in the school and handling mental health issues, to tackling all of the other managerial items that come across the principal's desk. Add to this is determining how, as a novice principal working with limited resources and personnel, the things he or she believes need to be done can best be accomplished. All of the novice, rural principals interviewed mentioned having multiple challenges when leading a school in a rural setting.

Instructional Rural Setting

Being a novice principal in a rural setting brings numerous unique challenges that must be addressed in order to lead a school toward improved student achievement. Ten of the twelve principals interviewed all recognized that the school district is usually the largest employer of the community. In fact, they felt that the school district is the centerpiece of the community where traditions are important and valued. The novice, rural principals also recognized that it is critical for the school to build relationships, partnerships with the businesses in the community, and to value what the town has to offer, even if it means shopping in the town and supporting the local economy. People are closely tied to the community and want to have a connection with the school in some meaningful way.

Resources and Finances

All twelve of the novice, rural principals shared that a lack of resources was a big concern when leading in a rural setting. Most of the principals shared that the lack of resources provided to their schools had an impact on their school in a variety of ways. They felt that rural principals have to be a bit more flexible in making and distributing financial resources. They were aware that all schools have funding issues, but it appeared rural schools have a higher level of poverty than their counterparts. Because rural students can come from higher poverty situations than suburban schools many of the novice principals had taught in, they are more transient and had less stability educationally.

Jason shared that after his experience working in a suburban setting as a teacher, there were several issues that appeared to be more impacted by the rural setting. He shared:

You're dealing with a different set of people from what you are in the suburban area. Things are maybe a little bit slower pace than [sic] what they would be in a suburban school setting. The change you're trying to push may take a little longer to convince people that this is the best thing for kids. I also think that dealing with some of the parents that you have in a rural school is a little bit more challenging. I talked to a parent the other day who was justifying to me the use of the N-word for his daughter. The parent told me it was no big deal because they named their dog the N-word.

Jason, though shocked at the response, was making sense of how he could change people's mindset in a rural setting.

Additionally, the principals shared the concern of attracting and securing high-quality professionals to a rural setting. They have found that typically the salary of a rural teacher is lower than salary of a suburban and urban teacher. Jason shared a common concern brought up by all:

I have been trying to fill a Behavior[al] Disorder (BD) teacher position for a while now. We have someone with a little bit of special education background, but she has no behavior experience. I am concerned about the quality of candidates we're going to get for next year. It concerns me to bring in someone with no experience who just needs a job, and I am worried that I will spend my whole first semester training this person and being there to respond to every behavior issue again. I'm a little worried that I'm going to be spinning my wheels even though we've got a year of experience under our belts with the problem. I also had third and fourth grade teaching positions open and only received five candidates and three of them were local people. I ended up hiring two of the local people because two of the non-local people backed out and took a job closer to the larger city. Having the challenge of attracting candidates to a rural area that is significantly far away from the metro area is very tough.

Jason sensed the difficulty and frustration of finding and hiring quality teaching candidates in more remote settings where funding results in offering lower teacher salaries. Anne was in agreement with Jason's frustration and also shared her frustration of recruiting high-quality candidates for her open teaching positions when working in a rural setting.

Anne agreed when she shared:

I always struggle with finding high-quality teaching candidates. It is always a question of who wants to move to the middle of nowhere to teach? Finding a good pool of applicants is hard and then of those applicants, does somebody really fit the bill and will they stay? So, I think that drawing in people is really, really difficult when you're in a rural setting.

Anne was making sense of the challenges she endured when hiring high-quality teachers in her rural setting. Tim shared similar sentiments. Because of declining enrollment and lack of resources, Tim's school and community went through some very difficult decisions five years ago. Tim clearly feels the impact when talking with his staff and people in the community. Five years ago, twelve teaching positions were cut and a school was closed in response to lack of resources. Tim's school district serves students in three neighboring communities. Tim shared that there is still a rift between the towns. The small-town dynamic is something that Tim had never experienced after growing up in a suburban setting. He shared:

Our financials are in better shape than they were five years ago, so we're in the process of trying to pass a bond issue getting our older building torn down out in front of the newer school building. We're in the process of trying to get that torn down and the whole dynamic comes back out again from five years ago. One community member told Tim, "We'll [sic], if that town gets something then we need to get something in return." It's just the whole political dynamic I guess I wasn't quite ready for. I didn't realize how entrenched people were in their small towns.

Tim was trying to make sense of the emotional side of community issues when there is a lack of resources due to declining enrollment.

Anne shared that her town is one of the smallest land-sized district in the state so they are actually landlocked and cannot grow. So, if the student population shifts with families moving to a more suburban setting, then their student enrollment declines and cuts occur. Anne shared:

Each year in the fall, after student count, the conversation about budget cuts comes up and it is very unsettling for everyone involved. I think it's more stressful for the rural districts because every year when that budget conversation comes up everyone starts biting their nails and saying, "Oh great, are we going to have to cut again this year?", "What's it going to look like?", "What are we going to have to do?", and "How do we get creative with what we have while also trying to support the programs we want to implement?"

Anne makes sense of what her staff and community thinks about the district fiscal position each year when student enrollment stays the same or declines. Samuel shared that he doesn't have as many resources as larger districts. He stated:

We don't have as many resources, and there are places that are farther away that can assist, but we don't have that. In a larger city about an hour away the resources are abundant and there's a million businesses, a million people wanting to help your school out. This is a challenge, to make those connections meaningful to have those people partnering with you and it ties into everything.

Samuel shared how he reflected on working in a rural setting and making sense of all he still had to do in his building, regardless of the lack of resources.

Jonathan came from being an assistant principal in a suburban school district; moreover, he never thought he would be leading a school in a rural setting. He shared that he did not get any principal preparation in his coursework on the differences in leading a school in a rural setting versus a suburban or urban setting. Jonathan agreed with Samuel's account when he stated:

There's not a lot to choose from in comparison to an urban setting. I think pay and insurance and all those things make a huge difference in comparison to the large schools. You have to be on the ball in order to get what you want and you have to be a great filter of people, and you have to sell yourself more than ever. You have to be very skilled at selling yourself and your school when interviewing candidates to have them choose us over the larger school with more resources.

Jonathan was making sense to understand the impact of the resources he had as an assistant in an urban setting compared to now working in a rural setting.

Madeline also agreed stating, "I think recruiting staff is harder in a smaller school. Finding staff is hard." Finding substitutes also came up in conversation with the novice, rural principals. Sarah, who came from teaching in a suburban setting to being a principal in a rural setting, shared:

One of the biggest things in a small district that I've noticed is finding substitute teachers. Finding the substitutes that we need is hard. But you know what, you're flexible, and you'll figure out a way to make it work and you just move on.

Another concern brought up during the interviews was the lack of the education support unit support in rural school districts. The education support unit is an

organization that serves the school districts with resources that they cannot afford to provide on their own. All school districts in this Midwestern state pay the same fee per student to receive these services, regardless of size. The education support unit provides resources such as school psychologists, social workers, physical therapists, occupational therapists, professional development specialists, and so on.

The perception from the rural, novice principal was that the education support unit was set up to assist the suburban and urban school districts and not the rural school districts and this was not the intent of the education support unit. It was also perceived that because rural school districts are further away from the main office, geographically speaking, a lack of resources were attributed to the smaller schools. Samantha shared that she had gone to a training at a suburban school district and noticed three education support unit staff presenting information to the group, and how involved they were with the suburban school to implement school initiatives. Samantha shared:

How is a rural school with our extreme budget concerns able to access these resources and do things that are good for kids, when all the resources are being utilized by the major metro schools? I have never seen the [education support unit] professional development learning community in my building all year. My special education team is awesome and they're helpful, but the instructional leadership component is missing.

Clearly there was a feeling that a lack of resources had an impact on rural school districts and the principals need to make sense of how this affects them, their teachers, and student learning. The notion of doing more with less is predominate in the rural

setting. Rural principals must rely on their own connections and creativity to make things happen to ultimately still offer a quality education to improve student achievement.

Carl shares his perception of rural leadership and how it impacts his role as an instructional leader.

Carl states:

I feel in rural school leadership you're going to have fewer resources to work with. I only have twenty-four staff and that's because a lot of our high school students start taking concurrent enrollment classes at the career academy in a neighboring community. Since the students are in various programs, we don't see all of our kids at one time, which is kind of new to me. That's a struggle...not a struggle but it's an opportunity for our kids, but it is something new to me and fairly new to our staff for the last couple of years. I think that rural leaders need to just be a bit more flexible in making ends meet. All schools have their issues, but it just seems like we have a high level of poverty here in our community and school. That is a challenge.

Carl reflected on making sense of all he has to know and understand when leading a school in a rural setting. Because his school cannot offer a variety of courses due to their size and financial restraints, his students go elsewhere to get their education. When the students are not present in the school it impacts the school culture.

The topic of budgets, when referring to lack of resources, also came up during the interviews. School districts in this Midwestern state operate on student enrollment-driven budgetary resources. The more students a school enrolls, the more money the facility receives from the state. What principals described is part of a larger state-driven effort to

consolidate rural districts into larger, more efficient, and sustainable consolidated schools. The main driver of this initiative is budget and fiscal solvency that is in jeopardy for many rural communities across the state. One impact on the principals' communities and practices is the community's perception of independence and identity as a learning community. Many school districts have had to consolidate and share superintendents in order to survive. This places an even greater demand on an administrator's breadth of responsibility for both the superintendent and rural principal. Not only does the budget impact the staffing of teachers and associates, but also administrators.

Jason shared the stress of school finances that hit him professionally as he had been placed in a very difficult setting with challenging student behaviors. Jason was well aware that as the only administrator, he had been dealing with student behavioral issues that have taken him out of his office and into specific classrooms. He admits that he had not been the best at communication, especially getting back to people because of these distractions, but he was improving. He shared he is considering looking elsewhere for employment because he does not know if he can continue with the breadth of responsibility balanced against the demands of managing student behavior.

Jason shared his unsupportive superintendent had disclosed some unsettling news with him. He explained:

I learned we were talking about administrative contracts in our spring board meeting, and we were told that since it was during spring break we didn't need to attend. The superintendent shared that the conversation gets awkward anyway if the principals are sitting in the room while they are talking about specific

principal contracts. Then the superintendent shared with me that one of the board members was kind of on a kick that we've for [sic] too many administrators and our budget is not looking good because of the minimal student pupil increase. So, they're looking at cutting money and one of the board members thinks we need to cut an administrative position. The superintendent flat out told me that my name was the one that came up because all I've been doing all year is dealing with behavior and I haven't really been a principal. I told the superintendent to bring the board member to the school to see what I am doing, and how I am trying to juggle all these things. But that frustrates me a bit. That makes me a bit leery. OK, what if that does happen? I'm the lowest guy on the totem pole, and I am the one that gets cut. School finances are in bad shape and it is not getting easier year to year.

Jason made sense of the reality that school finances have on buildings and personnel decisions. He knows he is doing everything he can to help his staff, but it challenges him professionally and personally knowing his performance and role is being questioned.

Jonathan shared that he understood the impact of finances in his district and takes responsibility to market his school to attract students hoping to increase student enrollment. Jonathan stated:

It is my responsibility to help communicate and push the school forward in terms of marketing ourselves. You've got to look at marketing and communication completely differently than you used to. Back in the day you didn't have to publicize yourself. Now you do. We're competing for students and so you have

to be your own marketing firm so making sure that everybody's on the same page and we're going in the same direction is really important.

Jonathan shared how he made sense of the fact that rural schools are in competition with the suburban and urban schools and that means that he needs to assist in publicizing the district to attract teachers to join their team.

Madeline imparted that the lack of funding had a greater impact on the rural schools in comparison to the larger school districts; consequently, the notion of doing more with less was expected. Madeline shared: "Money is a big difference for us [compared to large districts]. I guess I shouldn't say that because I imagine bigger schools have money problems too, but I think it's felt more...in a smaller school."

Madeline made sense of the financial impacts and the adverse influence they had on rural schools compared to larger districts. Samantha shared that her high school building budget for the school year is only \$10,000. She shared that she meets with a neighboring high school principal that is also rural, but larger, on a monthly basis. His building budget is roughly \$100,000 per year. The two school districts are ten miles apart and serve different communities. Samantha stated:

I mean when you look at the difference between my budget and his budget, when he talks about doing things in his school, some of the things he is able to do would take almost my whole budget for the school year.

In terms of impact on principals' practices, they have entered the principal position in challenging economic environments that require them to think about instructional priorities. Samuel explained that he is developing a "more with less" mindset. Due to demographic and economic shifts in the state and in his local

community, he is trying to balance multiple demands in his leadership. He explained that he needs to maintain programs and also meet students' needs in the context of future economic and career trends. He described the intersecting and layered demands that all the principals were facing as they began their positions:

And I think funding is a huge challenge, more with less. I mean it's declining [funding]. It's declining [funding]. We need to find solutions. We talked about it the other day. Like are you stretching your people thin on stuff?

Samuel is making sense of the reality that tight funding and budget cuts will be an annual occurrence in an already lean fiscal environment.

School budget constraints are significantly impacting the Midwestern state that my study was conducted in. When the school districts are given 0-1% allowable growth per year, it impacts all school districts, but especially the rural school districts which may add the impact of declining enrollment. This results in the school districts employ leaders in multiple intra-district leadership roles. In some cases, these circumstances created significant turnover in leadership positions and an annual redistribution of responsibilities.

This has created time-management concerns, role conflicts, fulfillment of responsibilities, and impacted their organizations' ability to make change and progress. For example, in Samantha's district the previous high school principal also served as the part-time district superintendent. The district made organizational changes to the makeup of the administrative team and now the district has a dedicated superintendent position. She now primarily serves as the principal, and does not have duties as a

superintendent. As a result, she and her staff feel more empowered to focus on improving the performance of the building and working as a team. Samantha explained:

So, that's kind of the atmosphere that I came in with. Just for everyone, it was different to have someone that was here, because last year, the principal was actually also the half-time superintendent. So, he was here all the time, but he was more doing the superintendent role than he was able to do the high school principal role.

It was challenging for principals to learn their new roles in the context of organizational change within their school districts. Novice principals have a difficult time learning their jobs when the job description is clear.

These extenuating organizational circumstances added additional challenges to principals' learning and development. In years past school districts were granted four to seven percent in the school funding formula, thus affording opportunities for the children. But in the past ten years the school funding allocation in this Midwestern state has gone down and it now sees just a one to two percent increase annually. In other years, one-year funding was given and halfway through the year the state issued an across-the-board cut taking away half a percent of the increase school districts had received.

The expectation for school districts is to deliver a top-notch education, and to do so with little to no increase in funding. To support this, school districts are also being awarded financial incentives when school districts consolidate, or if they share various personnel such as superintendents, business managers, directors, and so on. This dilutes the number of people to do the administrative and management responsibilities, placing

greater responsibility on the novice, rural principal. All of these limited resources lend to challenges in rural settings that are already less privileged financially due to declining enrollment.

Breadth of Responsibility

In rural settings, it is very common for one person to serve in two separate roles within the school district. This topic came up in my study as many of the novice, rural principals shared that they fulfill two or more roles within their school district. In fact, in this Midwestern state, the school districts are offered with financial incentives to allow school districts to consolidate and when this occurs, the likelihood of a principal to also fulfill another role within the school district is very high. Four of the twelve principals interviewed in this study were leading as a rural principal in either a consolidated school district or a school district sharing a superintendent.

Catherine, Madeline, Samantha, Sarah, Jason, and Amber all shared the challenge of wearing multiple hats while serving in their rural school districts. Catherine serves as the special needs principal and district special education director, Madeline serves as the secondary principal and district curriculum director, Samantha serves as the high school principal and district special education director, Sarah serves as the elementary principal and district Title I coordinator, Jason serves as an elementary principal, ELL district coordinator, TAG district coordinator and 504 building coordinator, and Amber serves as the elementary principal and district early childhood director.

All novice principals talked about their challenge of balancing their multiple roles. Although they did not complain, or lament on their situations, they did explain how the combination of less staff and increased professional responsibilities were trying

on their practices. They expressed how they had difficulty keeping up with the job due to the high demands on their time, and multiple roles that they fulfill for their schools and school districts. They all identified that there is an incredible amount of work that they cannot seem to maintain as part of their new roles as principal.

Madeline stated:

I think we do it all here [rural setting]. I think that's a lot. Bigger schools have a curriculum director and other roles. I think we have to do it here, all of it, and sometimes the lines get blurred between who is supposed to do what.

Madeline was making sense of the various responsibilities she has as a principal in a rural setting. The rural principal needs to achieve more because rural schools do not have multiple people fulfilling the various roles as do their urban and suburban counterparts; therefore, the rural building principal must ultimately complete all tasks of his or her own volition.

Sarah shared the same opinion as she was given the responsibility of building principal and Title I coordinator for the school district. She shared:

In a rural school, it's interesting because you become some of the other roles that in a big district they'd have another person. For instance, I am the Title I coordinator. In a bigger district, there would be a person for that role. I just find that our roles are a little more compacted into other roles, where you wouldn't have that in a bigger district.

Sarah used sensemaking to reflect on fulfilling the Title I coordinator role in her first year as well as serving as an elementary principal.

Catherine echoes the challenge of meeting all of the job demands of being a principal and special education director by stating, “Personally, I need to figure out the balance of how things are going to work and how I can devote my time to both jobs, both titles.” Amber shared that she was given the role of an elementary principal and early childhood director and found herself in charge of the preschool grant that oversees her school district and two private preschool programs. She shared:

I am struggling with learning what my role is as preschool coordinator. I want a job description. Can somebody tell me what I need to do? I am getting emails from the state telling me that I have reports due and have no idea what they are talking about. So, I called the state and I feel I got yelled at by them for just asking questions. I told them I am new and have never done this before. I feel like I don't have anyone to go to since this is my role in the rural school. Now I just found out that we are supposed to have a fenced-in playground for all our publicly funded preschools and we haven't had one for years in one of my schools. I don't know what to do and I don't like feeling incompetent. I feel like every day I am questioning things and I don't have answers. It is very frustrating. Thank goodness, my friend from my principal cohort is just the preschool director in a suburban school. She is just doing that, and I am doing everything. She shares things she gets from the state with me to help teach me what I need to learn. This has all been very frustrating just because I want to do it well and feel competent.

As she wipes the tears off her face, Amber is making sense of balancing her two roles in her rural schools. She wears multiple hats as the elementary principal and the

preschool director. She has never done this before and shared that she feels incompetent.

Kevin felt that flexibility is one of the leadership qualities an instructional leader must have to be effective. He shared, “You get pulled in so many different directions. You’re dealing with bus issues, then you’re dealing with a staff issue, then you’re dealing with a parent issue all in a matter of less than thirty minutes.” Kevin also shared that an instructional leader has to constantly think through things before actually making a decision. Principals have to make a decision on what is best for the whole building and every student, rather than just one classroom. Principals need to be able to understand and figure out what is needed which is an integral part of their role. Kevin clearly got a sense of how emotional things can get when making a decision. He shared, “I am constantly learning the ability to say no. There are so many times where the emotional side of you gets in the way of the most efficient way of doing something. I am learning that as I go.”

Embedded within the current state of rural schools’ management, the flexible nature and a lack of time to initiate instructional changes and innovation was a common sentiment among the principals. While they did not blame their leadership, faculty, or staff for lack of effort or competence, they did express some dissonance as new leaders who were eager to begin new programs and planning.

Kevin and Jason specifically expressed about how they feel pulled in many directions as a rural principal. They both made the comment that they wear multiple hats in the school district. Most times rural schools have to make budget decisions based on

declining enrollment or lack of state funding, thus placing a burden on the rural principal. Kevin shared:

I think the biggest challenge is you're the guy. You're the human resource department, you are the principal, you're the guidance counselor. You're the nurse at times. You are the therapist. You're it. When people have questions, they have one person to go to. When I go home and tell my wife about my day, she says, "Man, you have to do that as a principal? There's no one else to do that? There's no one else to take that student home?" I keep telling her, "Nope, not at the time." You're the bus driver, it is just a lot of different hats when it comes down to it because there's not enough resources for you to hire someone for each role or to hire someone for every need that kids have.

Jason echoes Kevin's feeling about wearing multiple hats in a rural setting. He shared:

In order to help with our budget, the district got rid of the curriculum director so now our superintendent is filling that role. Even though I am not the special education coordinator for the district, I am still dealing with all the special education issues that occur in the school. I am also the English Language Learner (ELL) and Talented and Gifted (TAG) coordinator for the district. And we're in the midst of updating our TAG plan because it is up for its three-year review so I am trying to get that done—on top of my daily responsibilities as a principal. Oh, I am also the 504 coordinator for my building so I end up going to pretty much every meeting that occurs in [the] building. There's just a lot of different hats you end up wearing that are time-consuming. And everybody wants a piece of you for a short amount of time every day, and it's hard to juggle those things sometimes.

Kevin and Jason are making sense of the long list of responsibilities that fall on their shoulders as they lead in a rural setting.

Part of the problem was the rural schools' approaches to human resource allocation of their leadership positions. Due to budget constraints, their schools employed leaders in multiple intra-district leadership roles. In some cases, this created significant turnover in leadership positions and an annual re-distribution of responsibilities. This created time-management and role conflicts that acutely impacted their organization's ability to move forward. For example, in Samantha's district the high school principal also previously served as the superintendent. She now serves as the principal and special education director, and does not have duties as a superintendent. Samantha summed up the strains on the administration team when there is a lack of actual staff members to complete all of the necessary tasks. She explained:

We have three administrators in our district, well actually two and a half. Our superintendent is half time. There are probably a lot of things that I currently do that if I had a full-time superintendent, I might not necessarily be doing. All the reporting we do on our own. The other principal and I get together and do those things. We are developing a kind of at-risk plan, working on an evaluation process to make sure we are matching, we're the home school liaison, the ELL [English Language Learners] person, the 504 coordinator. Between the two of us, we do all of those things. You have to be a master of a lot of things.

When a principal wears multiple hats within the school district it also puts stressors on the instructional staff. When the principal is needing to be present in a meeting in another building, that leaves the staff to figure things out on their own if an

issue arises. This leads to the importance of the building principal to establish clear roles and responsibilities of various school personnel to meet the needs of the students and staff in their absence.

A challenge shared by many of the participants was the difficulty seeing other administrators while serving in a rural setting. Tim serves in an elementary school located in one town and his counterpart serves in a middle-high school building in another town, yet they are in the same school district surrounded by cornfields. Tim shared about his challenge of being alone:

I feel like I am on an island by myself. Obviously, we have phone calls and we can video chat, but my elementary is in a town ten minutes away from the middle-high school principal. He's helped out a lot, but I think if we were physically in the same building or town it would be much easier for him to help me through things, or just communicate, because I kind of feel like I'm off on an island in this town by myself. Granted, we have phone and internet, but it is not the same as face to face. It is easy to feel isolated.

Tim senses the way things could be if he were serving in a little larger school district and had fellow administrators in the same town or building to lean upon.

Samantha echoes what Tim shared by stating, "A lot of times, the leaders in a rural school are on an island by themselves, and I've had to really foster relationships to try and help get myself more information. It's a challenge." Kevin shared that serving as a principal in a rural setting impacts his instructional role in several ways. The wide range of students he serves in a rural setting can be a challenge. Kevin shared:

The thing about working in a rural school is that there's such a wide range of students. We have students in poverty to the students that are very well off with their families. You have families where the parents are very involved, but then you've got families [where] the parents do not provide support. It's trying to find that happy medium. Fair is not always equal when it comes down to students and what they get. It's just the wide range of students coming in.

Kevin shared how he tries to make sense of finding a happy medium when addressing all types of students and families that walk through his school doors.

"There's only one of me!" states Madeline when referring to all she has to accomplish in her role as a novice, rural principal. Most days rural principals feel as if they need to be seen everywhere in order to appear engaged in the school and community. The principals are invited to attend various events from the local pancake breakfast to support cancer research to the Rotary Club fundraiser to support school scholarships to the baseball fundraiser at the local chicken restaurant. The rural principals feel pulled in every direction and worry about saying "no" in fear of appearing as if they do not care resulting in negative community backlash. Catherine shared her concerns on being so visible in a rural community:

If you're in a larger district as an administrator I don't think anyone would know my name. Good and bad to that, because sometimes I don't want people to know who I am. But you're more visible in a rural setting because there's not as many, obviously. There are only a few administrators in a rural district. News travels fast. That was the hardest thing for me to get used to, you sneeze and somebody knows about it in ten minutes. You know what I mean? It's like everybody

knows everything and the problem is it's like the game of telephone. The more that things get passed along, the facts are so twisted.

Rumors in a rural setting travel extremely fast. Adding the powerful figure of principal in the school setting, events at schools are a community topic, and building principals are an easy target to become part of the rumors. Samantha shared how she sees her role, and how it is perceived by the community. She shared:

Everybody either knows somebody who has gone there [the school], has gone there, has kids that go there, and so it's really the centerpiece of the community. Everybody is related to everybody. Most people have parents, grandparents, cousins, aunts, uncles that have already gone to my school district. It's pretty amazing how that works.

Samantha continued to share how close the connections are with people from rural communities. She made sense of and believed that perhaps the principals have more of a connection with parents in a rural setting rather than in an urban setting. She shared how she runs into parents at the grocery store or when she is taking her own children to a doctor appointment.

All of the principals shared in some form the importance of being visible in a rural community as the building principal. Visibility and communication with various stakeholders is critical to thriving as principal in a rural setting.

In many cases members of the school board attended the principal's school; consequently, board members often have a vested interest in the school's success. They have learned that the school board members are pretty influential part of the community. Tim shared that his school board members will just show up in the school

unexpectedly and expect Tim to drop everything he was doing for that moment and meet with the school board member to address their questions and concerns. He has learned that communication is very important in a rural community.

Kevin shared that it is pretty common for a school board member to ask him what does his school need and why does he need it. Kevin has also learned that in a rural setting the number of people that he has to communicate decisions with is wider because not all of the stakeholders are directly in the district every day. He continued to share that he has to be very strategic in how he says things because the manner in which he articulates something can be easily misinterpreted and the information can go haywire very quick. Jason echoed by sharing:

I do try and get out to the community events. We had the metro news channel come through town for a special event, and I went and talked to key people in the community. I try to be as visible as possible, which is kind of hard because I am driving back and forth an hour each morning and night. So, it's hard to stay too late some nights. I don't get out there as much as I want to. But when I do attend events, the students and families notice. I once went to a community soccer game and saw several of my students play. A group of my third graders just stopped playing all together and yelled. I was like, "Yeah, I'm here, keep playing." I am noticed everywhere I go. It's neat, but at the same time it adds another layer of stress and responsibility.

Jason has made sense of the impact his presence has made to the students, families and community when he is visible and involved in community events.

Samuel shared how in his district all principals are expected to come to every school board meeting. He thinks this may be a different practice than in a larger school system. Samuel shared:

We are expected to attend all school board meetings and wherever I go, I represent the school district. You're expected to be seen everywhere. You're expected to be at a million basketball games, football games, volleyball games, attend Business After Five, and attend all concerts. If you're not there, people recognize it. You are the face of the school. I think the number of places I need to be is more than in a suburban setting. Your job is your life! I feel I go to more events than anybody in my school district, and I can miss one event, and I will get approached by someone and they ask, "Where were you last night?" I think whether it's with the chamber or the city, my role is just more recognizable and the expectation is that you do attend everything. That is what you do when you're at work, then even when you're away from work, you're at work. You don't get a lot of separation from that.

Samuel is clearly making sense of the responsibility he holds as a rural principal and how his image and presence is a reflection of the school district.

Several of the novice, rural principals shared how recognizable they are in a small town. Samuel and Madeline shared how involved they are in their school, yet if they are not present for an event, it gets noticed by various stakeholders. Madeline shared:

I think in a rural setting you have to be visible at all times. That's another challenge. In a larger district, I could go out in the public and nobody may know me. Everybody knows you and wants to discuss things with you...I think that is

very challenging in a small town, they want you to be at the pancake breakfast and then the cub scout event. That's part of it. Then, since everybody knows each other, I think you have to walk a fine line between different stakeholders, make sure that incorrect perceptions get changed.

The principals also internalized their professional responsibilities in a way that impacted their personal lives, where the personal and professional "bubbles" were not mutually exclusive parts of their identities as school principals. As Jonathan stated, "I think that's the thing that I'm trying to be cognizant of and trying to stay on top, and also maintaining my personal life outside of work and not always taking it home." They were each working to balance their personal and professional lives and meet their obligations to their families, their schools, and communities. More often than not, these two spheres of their identities collided, and the principals negotiated their spaces as best they could. For example, Samantha explained strategies she used to build in personal space for her and her family. She described one anecdote regarding how she now had to plan more carefully for trips to the community grocer. Samantha said:

You know, there's times when I have to send [my spouse] to the grocery store because I can't be in public. I mean, because I, I love to get up on Saturday mornings and not put any make-up on and wear my pajamas all day. I can't do that as easily as [I] used to be able to.

Samantha knew the probability was very high that she would run into a parent or community member that would want to talk to her about their child's progress, last night's football game or other school business. There were times she just wanted to

compartmentalize her personal and professional spaces, and had to purposefully create boundaries.

In another example, Madeline elaborated on how she felt more anonymous in a larger, urban community prior to working in a rural school community. However, she embraced the stature and recognition that was part of her job, although not explicitly stated in her position description. Madeline explained:

So, this was all brand new for me . . . that “small town feel” that you always hear about. I think I’m seen in a different light. I am more recognizable than I was in a larger community. I do try to be out and about and be seen. It’s part of my life. They see me with my [spouse], and they see me with my kids. I love that about being in a small town... [but] you don’t get that privacy that you necessarily wished that you had.

It is the expectation that the building principal attend as many events as they can to support all the students and the various programs the school has to offer. Yet if the building principal misses an event to attend their own child’s event, they get ostracized by the school staff. Samuel shared in frustration:

I go to more events than anybody, and I can miss an event, and people will say, “Where were you last night?” I went to 154 events this year and people recognized the one that I didn’t go to. I think it is just silly but we are more recognizable and the expectation is that you do attend everything.

Regardless of the challenges that novice, rural principals experience each and every day, they all feel a sense of accomplishment and satisfaction. Relationships with various stakeholders is essential. Madeline shared:

It's a lot of work time-wise and you have a lot of different things that maybe you wouldn't have to do being at a bigger school, but I think it's more rewarding because you know the kids, you know their families. There's a close-knit I think there's a warmth. I think the kids know they can talk to staff members because they'll understand where they're coming from. I just think there's a homier feel...I think there's a closeness in a rural school.

Although the workload of principals in all schools is demanding and requires time management, work-life balance, and boundaries, the rural school principals explained an acute level of exposure and vulnerability. The number and level of responsibilities these novice principals faced appeared to have exceeded the workload of typical novice principals in other settings. The principals explained that they understood and accepted the challenges of their rural principal positions. They embraced the workload, the community, and despite expressing vulnerabilities, they all planned to persist and work to the best of their abilities to help their communities.

Even though all the novice, rural principals interviewed in this study have gotten frustrated by their school's lack of resources, staff pool for and expected visibility in the community, they all agreed that they wanted to continue as a principal. Each participant smiled when reflecting on their important role and the impact that they make each and every day. They all felt a sense of accomplishment and truly enjoy getting to know their students, staff, and families on a personal level. The novice, rural principals take their jobs very seriously and know that the decisions they make each and every day do have an impact on their students. They hope their students and community appreciate all they do for them to offer a well-rounded, rigorous education to prepare them for life after school.

Reality of Being Rural

The low population compactness in conjunction with family isolation and community remoteness uniquely characterizes the rural setting. In a rural environment, the family and the community can be substantially influenced by the school. The novice principals interviewed in this study reflected on their rural communities they serve and about their leadership.

When Anne thinks about rural school leadership she thinks about the students and families she serves. She stated:

I think leading in a rural school gives you a lot of opportunity to really get to know the kids and families because you're not having that constant new people moving in, or boundary changes like urban settings, or things like that. You know your student body for the most part; either you're stable or your declining. So, if you're in a stable setting it gives you a great opportunity to really dive in and get to know families, which can be a pro and a con. But I think that is a unique piece that I like about serving in a rural setting. My rural town is the smallest-land sized district in the state, and we are actually landlocked. We cannot grow. Our student population is pretty much what it will always be, unless people leave. We can't get a whole lot bigger than we are, which puts us in a very interesting spot. This in itself impacts me as an instructional leader in a rural setting.

Anne is making sense of the impact her rural town has on her role as an instructional leader knowing that the town is landlocked and cannot grow any larger.

Samuel shared how he makes connections with his community as an instructional leader. Samuel shared:

I think if you build those connections and make those connections the community wants to support the school, and they have different levels of expectations. The community trusts us. They trust we're hiring good teachers, that we're doing what's best for kids, that we're supporting the local economy and working with them, and including them. I think it's probably easier in a rural community because we don't have as many resources close [by].

Samuel is making sense of using the community to his advantage when it comes to making connections to do beneficial things for the students.

Amber sees the benefit of leading in a rural setting. She shared:

I was really excited to move to a rural community. It really meshed with my beliefs about how school should help mold their students, and it should feel like a family. I think there's a lot of opportunities that happen in my community, and I think a lot of people want the schools to do well. There's so much community involvement that occurs, but we can still do more and get better. We need to do a better job of articulating all the great things we are doing to help people understand. I am learning that in a rural community some people can't get past the history and that is frustrating. They are stuck in the history. The great part is that I am the only principal of a PK-1 building and so that means that I can get stuff done in my buildings. In bigger districts, you have more than one person and it takes longer to get initiatives going. It's almost beneficial that I am the only principal in this environment.

Amber makes sense of her role as the only PK-1 principal in her rural community. She also finds strength within her community to make changes.

Catherine sees her school's role as the main centerpiece of the community. When she was an instructional coach in a suburban school district, no one knew who she was. Catherine feels she's more of an icon in the rural district.

She shared:

I think you're more known in a rural setting. You know, I think that if I were a principal in my former suburban school district, I don't think people would know my name. Good and bad to it, because I sometimes don't want people to know who I am. But I think you're more visible in a rural setting because there's not as many of us.

Catherine is making sense of her role as a rural principal and the impact she makes serving her students and staff. She recognizes the fact that there are not as many principals in her rural setting so everyone knows who she is.

Several of the novice, rural principals shared that communication among the various stakeholders is very important. Communication in a rural setting can be challenging because community members may or may not work in the community in which they live. Kevin shared:

I think the biggest thing is working together and the amount of communication. If you have good communication between stakeholders, it's a better environment the kids have. I feel lucky to have such supportive stakeholders. The majority of my parents are very supportive. My superintendent and school board are super supportive, so I am very lucky, but they do expect very clear communication when it comes down to questions such as: "What does my school need?" and "Why do we need it?" When it comes down to communication, I have to think to

myself: “Okay, who do I have to communicate this to and why?” I have to go down the list. The amount of people I have to communicate to, especially in a rural area, the amount of people you have to communicate decisions to is wider just because not all the stakeholders are directly in the district every day. The communication piece is probably one of the most difficult things. I hate to say it but if you forget to communicate with a few people, and they might get upset with you, but it’s just down to communicating with so many people that I make a list to not forget anyone.

Kevin made sense of the impact of communicating with all the necessary people knowing that many of his stakeholders may not work in the community, so they need to find out pertinent information in some fashion in order to remain informed. Kevin continued to share that communicating weather-related decisions is always tricky in the rural setting. He shares:

Weather is always interesting. Winter weather is always more interesting. You’re going to have less snow days in the city just because they’re all right there. You have to worry about all the elements and you have to learn about the student’s driving. You have to worry about everything. Parents may not work in town so when it snows and it means closing school early, you have to communicate with plenty of time left in the school day so parents can get back to town to pick up their child. You have to think about the winter elements, and you have to worry about how that’s going to impact all the people around you.

Making sense of all the people to communicate with during inclement weather is a unique challenge that rural principals face. Because rural communities have wider

boundaries to cover in order to transport students, additional issues arise when thinking through weather-related decisions.

The principals interviewed shared their understandings of what it is really like serving in a rural setting. A variety of topics surfaced when the principals reflected on their rural community, what it entailed and how they made sense of their impact on the community. Jason shared:

Well, you're dealing with a different set of people than what you are in the metro area. People in a rural setting remember attending the same school when they were a kid, and it was good for them, so why should things change now? Things are maybe at a little slower pace[d] than what they would be in a metro-type school. The change you're trying to push through, it's gonna take a little bit longer to convince people that this is the best thing for kids. Dealing with some of the parents that you've got in a rural school is a little bit challenging. For example, I talked to a parent the other day who tried to justify to me the use of the N-word when calling his daughter. The parent told me that they've got a dog that's named the N-word. I was taken back by this parent and had to pull myself back a little bit and say to myself, okay, this is a totally different set of people than what I've worked with in some other non-rural districts.

Jason was making sense of the types of parents he is coming in contact with and how this may impact his school and school culture.

Amber found that the rural setting somehow allows people to express who they know and how they have power. She shared:

I had a father call me and he was yelling. He was throwing out names to me. I mean I have never had parents do that to me before. He acted as if that gave him some sort of credibility. I don't know. I told him that I am not from here so telling me those names doesn't mean anything to me. I've also had more people call me honey than I've ever had before in my life. I don't know if that is a small-town thing or not. I would introduce myself as the principal of their child's school, and they would then call me honey. That was interesting. I have also had a lot of parents comment on my age or make comments that I am a female, which also surprised me. My age or [gender] shouldn't make a difference but it seems to get brought up here all the time.

Amber is making sense of the community culture and how things are allowed to be articulated, even if they can appear offensive, rude, or inappropriate.

Political power in a rural community was a topic that came up with several of the novice, rural principals. This was expressed in multiple ways but commonly around school board elections, presidential elections, and during times of finding avenues to pass initiatives. Jason shared:

You have to be kind of careful about things that you say, especially in a year like this year when we just had a heated election. I realized that I don't have some of the same [political views] that a lot of people in our town do. I have to be really careful about some of that and who I am talking to about politics. This is especially important right now in our state's legislature where it's a lot of Republican-driven stuff that a lot of teachers don't necessarily agree with—

[whether] Republican [or] Democrat. It's kind of a challenging time to be an educator.

Jason made sense of his role as he clearly represents his school and at times gets asked his opinion and must be very careful not to take sides. This is especially critical when dealing with a debated topic or event.

Tim reflected on his school that is housed in one town, the other school in his district is located in a neighboring town, and a third school in another town. Tim shared:

I am always walking a fine line of the different towns because all three town's elementary kids come to one town so you have to make sure you're not making judgements. For instance, in one of my first emails to a parent, I didn't capitalize all the letters of the other town. The parent sent me a nasty email telling me that each of those letters represents something as an abbreviation and must be capitalized. I was like, "Oh sorry, I didn't realize it was that big of a" It's just the small things like that, making sure that you're learning the small-town politics and who's influential and things like that.

Tim realized very quickly that he had to make sense of his community and what it represented and to learn who the influential community members were.

Kevin continued to talk about housing in a rural setting when he shared:

I think that's part of the rural aspect because housing is just not easy to come by. It's not cheap when it comes down to in town versus out in the country. I get a lot of transient students coming in. I have only worked in a rural setting but when you look at education, the gap between your higher students and the lower students. You can see why the higher students are succeeding, and you can

understand why these other students have a hard time. It's because the level of support that they have at home. There's such a wide gap between those.

Kevin used sensemaking as he tried to understand the difference between the socio-economic impact of students who enter his school each day and the instructional gaps that are evident.

Samantha shared a little bit about her community, and how she works with the various stakeholders. She shared:

Getting to know the stakeholders I work with is important. It's pretty important because we're the biggest employer in the town. Everybody either knows somebody who has gone there, has gone there, or has kids that go there. It's really the centerpiece of the community and especially in a rural area, those traditions are so important. You have to be aware and make sure you have good communication with all your stakeholders. If you're going to address a school tradition, you need to make sure you're getting enough conversations with different groups so you know you are moving in the right direction that will be supported in the community.

Samantha is making sense of her role in the community and the rural setting where traditions are valued and the school is the centerpiece of the community.

Jason interpreted the uniqueness of being a principal in a rural school and reflected on the past holiday season. Jason shared:

The parents, and the kids, in a rural district, and even the teachers to a certain extent, they just value different things. Right before winter break, we had a teacher that was having kids go and learn Christmas carols. They would go

around school on the last day before holiday break and they were signing Christmas carols. That's one thing that I struggled with, because I'm not much of a religious guy myself, but from a school perspective if we're going to be doing Christmas carols then we better be doing the Hanukkah song and we had better be doing the Kwanzaa song and things like that. But that was the expectation in the rural school and this teacher has been doing [this] for over twenty-five years. In my former suburban setting that would never be a thought. If we were going to do songs, it was going to be multicultural and it was going to represent as many people as we could. But in a rural setting, you've got more blue-collared people that are very strong in religion and that's the group you're dealing with. So, your values change a little bit, they don't see things from a different perspective a lot of the times. You just have to get used to that.

Jason tried to make sense of what his school's culture allowed for many years even though he knew it was not right. He finally had to step back and adjust his values as he led his rural school.

Anne shared the uniqueness of serving in a rural setting and the rumor mill. She shared:

The rumor mill. Trying to tame the rumor mill. Small towns, everything spreads like wildfire. As so you try and contain it within your town. For us, we also have neighboring towns, and so when the rumor spreads beyond just our town, it becomes harder to draw people in. In small towns like mine, you don't have larger communities to meet new people. I had to build relationships with the people I worked with and a lot of times those people became your friends, just

because you were stuck in the location. It is an interesting perspective on relationships. If people don't fit in well or make friends well in the rural community, then it would be difficult to stay in the community.

Anne was clearly making sense of the rumors that spread in a rural setting as well as how relationships are formed. This can be a challenge for those who don't build relationships with those they work with, something that is occasionally difficult for administrators in a leadership position.

As Carl reflected on the rural setting and the challenges he faced, he reflected on the lack of diversity in his rural community. His community serves students that are 98% White.

He shared:

Our diversity rate is basically zero. Yeah, we have free and reduced lunch kids, high-poverty kids and that's challenging for us, but no diversity. Instead we deal with students that are in the fight or flight survival mode. Getting the students to feel that they are in a safe setting in which they can learn and feel comfortable is a challenge. Sometimes that alone is a very big struggle, not sure if it's just a rural thing, but still a struggle. I just wish we had more diversity so students could learn from each other that way, but we don't.

Carl senses the struggle of educating students to the fullest when his school is not multicultural. Instead he is dealing with very impoverished students who need to feel safe at school.

Jonathan agrees with Carl as he shared about his rural school. Jonathan shared:

Our rural community is lacking diversity. You have some ingrained misunderstanding of diversity and not understanding the global picture of things. In my suburban setting, we had our business partners, and they talked about having a better context of cultural and global awareness. In the rural community, it is not the case. I feel we are not preparing our students for a culture of diversity. I keep asking myself, “How do I get the students in our school the kind of global awareness to understand that there’s way more out there than what is just here in this rural community?” I need to show our students culture and show them global awareness and appreciating other people.

Jonathan is making sense of the lack of multiculturalism in the rural setting and how to prepare his students for the 21st Century. Jonathan shared his interaction with his rural community when he said:

I came into a culture and to a rural setting that is very blue collar; rough around the edges. I had to ask myself, how do I break down those barriers to get them to understand that things are different and that we are working together with families and the community in partnership to boost our education for our students and our town? I came from working in a suburban setting with many opportunities in a larger system. Working in a rural setting is very different.

Jonathan is making sense of the culture he now represents and how different it is from his previous suburban setting.

Samuel shared a bit about his rural community, and how he interacted with the community in his position. He shared:

In a rural community people are more tied together. Even though we struggle with family engagement, our families do care and want to know what's going on in the school. [In] [t]his day and age the parents post everything on the community Facebook page. I mean, every little thing you do gets posted. I think it's closer knit. People want a connection with the school. I find that building connections with community members makes a difference. Overall the community and families trust us. Because we are so small, we use all of our resources and come together as a community. The school really is the center of the community. We're the biggest business in town. We employ the most people in our town. A third of the population of our community is at school each day. That tells our community members to come in and be part of the school.

Samuel makes sense of how important the community is to his role as a rural principal.

In all, the principals interviewed for this study felt that being a leader in a rural setting is an honor that comes with great responsibility. Not only do they hold high ranks in rural settings and must ensure a strong educational system for their students, but they also must understand the communities in which they serve. Many of the participants interviewed were serving in communities that are comprised of a high number of students living in poverty. The novice, rural principals understood education allows for social mobility for their children. They all felt a great sense of accountability in leading schools that educate their children, and they know that their schools create paths to the future as their students go onto college and the workplace.

In a rural setting, it is essential that the community trusts the local school district and what it has to offer. The school district is the centerpiece of the community and a safe place for so many of their families. The school district must build a strong relationship with the community and offer opportunities for their children. The school district must also be purposeful when taking on new initiatives and communicate clearly with numerous stakeholders. When the school district brings the notion back to families and that everything they do is for their kids, then the rural communities tend to jump on board and support the school district. If the school district does things the wrong way, bypassing the community as a stakeholder, then initiatives fail. The school district must build strong relationships within the rural community, and those relationships start with the school district leaders, specifically the superintendent and principals.

Summary of Findings

The principals shared their instructional leadership concepts, and how they affected their actions as rural, novice principals. Additionally, they clearly answered the two research questions asked in this study: (1) What instructional leadership concepts and actions do rural, novice principals describe as most important to their emerging practices as school leaders? (2) What are the most emergent leadership challenges that novice, rural principals identify as they transitioned into a building principal position? Throughout this chapter I shared quotes from the twelve novice, rural principals interviewed as part of this dissertation. The quotes were at varied lengths and provided key pieces of data that shared their judgements and sensemaking experiences from their new roles as building principals. Each of the principals reflected on how they

made sense of the questions asked as they elaborated on their role as an instructional leader.

Instructional leadership practices were shared as the novice, rural principals interviewed emphasized how they intended to be closely involved in instructional improvement in their schools and how they saw their role as instructional leaders. Communication and relationships were seen as the most important part of their role as an instructional leader. Each novice, rural principal talked about using their communication style to their desire to be open and transparent leaders and maintain honest dialogue. Developing others was also shared as one of the most important jobs in their role as an instructional leader. They knew that in order to enhance their teachers' practices, they first needed to build relationships and establish trust. Accountability for academic performance on standardized tests was also shared as a public measure of their principal performance.

Multiple challenges in their role as a building principal were shared during the interviews in this study. Some of the challenges were expected by the novice, rural principals and some were not. The challenge of addressing special education issues was brought to light during this study. Although five of the novice, rural principals in this study were former special education teachers, the majority of the participants were not. They shared that their lack of special education knowledge, processes, procedures and law made their job more difficult on a daily basis. Additionally, the principals interviewed also shared that the non-special education student behavior took much of their time during the school day. The novice, rural principals felt a lack of preparation with student behavior management skills. They felt they needed to understand how to

address these issues on a system wide basis and know how to empower their teachers dealing with the non-special education behaviors in their classrooms. Management responsibilities were also shared as a need in order to run an effective school. It was expressed that the novice, rural principal was expected to have all the necessary skills of an experienced principal to address concerns. The need for a strong and reliable mentor was suggested to help the novice principal navigate through the various challenges.

Understanding the instructional rural setting that the novice principal leads has unique challenges that must be addressed to lead a school towards improved student achievement. The school and community connection is paramount for the rural school to be successful. The lack of resources and finances were a big concern in leading a school in a rural setting. Because of the limited resources, the breadth of responsibility was unique in that often the novice, rural principal fulfilled multiple roles within the school district with minimal or no additional training. The reality of being rural was also shared as the novice, rural principals clearly understood that they needed to be actively involved in their community. The principal participants understood that their school was the centerpiece of the community and because of that, they needed to keep the community perception at the forefront of their thinking when making decisions as an instructional leader.

The novice principal participants clearly reflected the various responsibilities of their role as instructional leaders. This included their understanding of the impact they had on their rural community and the students and families they served. Because of the participants' candidness, specific implications for research and practice were able to be determined.

CHAPTER 5. DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

The purpose of this study is to identify the challenges facing novice, rural principals as they are challenged to perform a role demanding a breadth of management and instructional leadership responsibilities. Although research has verified the impact and current needs of principals, limited research has targeted specifically rural principals and their unique needs and circumstances (Preston et al., 2004). Principal leadership is about inspiring others to rally behind a common vision or reach an ultimate goal and the ability to see the big picture while not losing sight of the process along the way (Williams & Lindsey, 2011). To do this, novice, rural principals must overcome many challenges.

When the remoteness of a rural community can be a barrier in attracting and retaining school principals and teachers, the school's inner systems for establishing consistent implementation of effective practice is of utmost importance (Redding & Walberg, 2012). In many ways, rural schools are subject to advantaged-diligent governance by school boards with a vested interest in the well-being of their small communities, school personnel who assume broad responsibilities for their students' success, close-knit families, and an abundance of social capital (Redding & Walberg, 2012). The impact of rural principals is profound, and they are expected to know all the answers and make decisions quickly and swiftly to keep the building moving towards continual improvement. They are expected to demonstrate a willingness to continually learn and grow for both themselves and the people that they serve. Principal leadership is about growth, personal responsibility, and accountability (Williams & Lindsey, 2011). Through this study, I have learned all of the aforementioned is particularly relevant for the novice, rural principal.

On July 1 of each year experienced public school teachers in the Midwestern state wherein this study was conducted are appointed to serve as a principal and leader of a school building. They are suddenly expected to know all the answers. These individuals have obtained their appropriate education and administrative certificate. Crossing over to the principal role represents a sizeable shift for most newcomers, an often abrupt change in perspective, expectations, and work tasks for novices (Spillane & Lee, 2014). With this said, the majority of novice principals consider their most important learning for the role to be “on the job” (Clarke & Wildy, 2004). The principal provides direction and support in order to actively distribute the responsibility among all stakeholders (Urlick & Bowers, 2014).

Compared to urban principals, leadership as a novice, rural principal creates its own unique challenges (Preston et al., 2014). Rural principals have responsibilities that stretch across the breadth of building management and educational leadership (Grissom et al., 2014). Rural principals are engaged as passionate, honest, trustworthy, visionary people, whose hearts and minds are all directed toward making life in rural communities better, stronger, and more vibrant (Williams & Lindsey, 2011). Rural principals wear many hats in their school buildings and the districts in which they serve (Preston et al., 2014).

Most of the research reviewed revolves around new leaders in urban school systems. There is little research on the problems encountered by novice principals during the first few years of their tenure (Alvy & Coladarci, 1985). A great challenge for novice principals is to understand and create opportunities to apply their preparation skills and knowledge to situations in the new job setting (Danzig, 1997). Rural principals must

have the ability to relate to a wide range of people and personality types (Williams & Lindsey, 2011). Therefore, this study adds to the limited research, and creates a deeper understanding of the challenges faced by novice, rural principals.

To gain a deeper understand of the challenges novice, rural principals experience, I posed two research questions: (1) What instructional leadership concepts and actions do rural, novice principals describe as most important to their emerging practices as school leaders? (2) What are the most emergent leadership challenges that novice, rural principals identify as they transitioned into a building principal position? The 12 principals interviewed shared their instructional leadership concepts, and how it affects their actions as rural, novice principals.

Novice principal leadership experiences are often described as overwhelming, pressure filled “reality shocks” (Spillane & Lee, 2014, p. 434). Compared to their professional training, the majority of novice principals consider their most important learning to take place via trial and error, and through reflection on professional experiences and lessons learned while in the principal position (Clarke & Wildy, 2004; Cowie & Crawford, 2008; Nelson et al., 2008). Novice principals’ face many management and leadership challenges as they navigate in their new leadership role, such as time management, lack of policy knowledge, timely completion of paperwork, curriculum knowledge, and budget management (Lee, 2015; Nelson et al., 2008; Starr & White, 2008).

The most recent research on novice principals’ leadership has primarily included principals who work in U.S. urban schools (Spillane & Lee, 2014) with limited attention given to rural administrators’ knowledge and skills development relevant to rural settings

(Arnold, Newman, Gaddy, & Dean, 2005). In response to this gap in the rural school leadership literature, the purpose of this study was to understand how novice, rural principals thought about and enacted their emerging instructional leadership practices.

This study reports on how 12 novice, rural principals in a U.S. Midwestern state engaged in their leadership for learning practices in rural contexts. My findings indicated that the principals demonstrated leadership enthusiasm and resiliency in the face of contextually relevant challenges that impacted their rural school organizations and practices. However, rather than contributing to the dominant narrative that positions rural schools as disadvantaged and dysfunctional, they provided clear, research-based approaches to the establishment of new instructional expectations and the formation of positive school cultures. They exemplified sophisticated interpretations and reflections on their practices, which is unique for novice principals at their stage of learning and development.

Effective leadership is intensely interpersonal as a leadership challenge, elevating the important role principals hold in establishing relationships built on collaboration, commitment, and trust (Thessin & Clayton, 2012). It is their principal personality as well as their informal and formal behavior that sets the tone of the climate for the building (Trump, 1981). Strong rural principals see the strengths and weaknesses in the people with whom they work, are honest with them about those qualities, and give people opportunities to shine and grow, while at the same time attempting to keep failures to a minimum (Williams & Lindsey, 2011). The principal's level of confidence in leadership skills must be strong as the role of the principal continues to become demanding (Airola et al., 2014). According to Williams and Lindsey (2011), people have to trust that a

principal is working in their best interest, is accountable to the group, will not blame others when things go amiss, and will give credit where credit is due.

This phenomenological research using sensemaking as a theoretical perspective explored the experiences of novice, rural principals and the challenges they faced as instructional leaders within a U.S. Midwestern state. The conceptual framework for the study is first reviewed, with revisions, to reflect the study's conclusions. The purpose of the research was not to evaluate principal training programs in the state, but rather to present a picture of the average novice, rural principal experiences as instructional leaders in their specific role.

Research Question 1

In this section I will discuss Research Question 1: What instructional leadership concepts and actions do rural, novice principals describe as most important to their emerging practices as school leaders? My study revealed new findings regarding the experiences of novice principals in rural schools. Diverging from previous novice leader research that described the sudden pressure that typified novice principals' acclimation to school leadership, these principals portrayed a level of sophistication that was comparable to more experienced administrators (Masumoto & Brown-Wildy, 2009). Current research on instructional leadership stresses the role of the site-based leader in setting directions, developing people, and making the organization work (Masumoto & Brown-Welty, 2009). The novice principal experience has been described as a difficult transition in all contextual settings, where new principals often express frustration, anxiety, and role conflict as they begin their leadership careers (Spillane & Lee, 2014).

The principals in this study acknowledged that the multiple tasks and sometimes overwhelming workload was a real part of their daily leadership positions. However, they did not appear to dwell on the management aspects of the job and were not deterred from engaging in very authentic and transparent leadership activities. They described four distinct, yet interrelated areas to focus their instructional leadership. They were: communication and relationships, developing others, accountability, and challenges. In part, some of the principals described situations where they were following long-tenured leaders who established loose systems that had become very routine and comfortable for the school and community. For others, the principals observed and interpreted cultures that embraced the status quo regarding teaching and learning expectations.

The novice principals interviewed all identified a need to set clear expectations for instructional improvement in their buildings and clearly understood that it was their role as the instructional leader to communicate effectively and build relationships, develop others in the field, share accountability practices and understand and accept all the challenges. From the onset, they engaged in critical conversations with teachers about instructional expectations. Effective principals make others feel as though they are a valuable part of the process, while working towards a common goal, in this case instructional growth (Williams & Lindsey, 2011). The novice principals also approached specific teachers about their classroom performance in terms of instruction and professional development. They described a comprehensive approach to their instructional leadership that encompassed both individual and school-level accountability to set and meet goals.

However, for novice principals, like the ones interviewed in my study, who are often mired in managerial tasks and making immediate impacts, these critical aspects of leadership can often be challenging to prioritize (Spillane & Lee, 2014). Although the novice principals in this study did not articulate their approaches as part of their broader vision of leadership or their school mission, their leadership philosophies and educational priorities clearly expanded beyond where their school was presently located on a continuum of development. They did not explain how long they anticipated their changes would take to come to fruition, but they clearly recognized that building relationships and rapport is a slow process taking time and effort. Some of the participants felt that due to past leadership issues in their schools it might take several years before strong relationships can be built and trust is gained, all while reinforcing that student achievement must improve.

None of the novice, rural principals in this study were allowing the status quo to continue. In each case there had been some issues with the previous principal that they had been encouraged to address. In many of cases, the previous principal was management oriented, and did not spend enough time on instructional improvement. With either expectation from the community or direction from the superintendent to improve instruction, this leadership expectation was a significant change for teachers from the previous management style. Teachers often felt that the novice, rural principal was stepping into their classroom unnecessarily, because that was not how it was previously done, and this created questions of trust.

Compared to previous research on novice principals, their narrated experiences and approaches indicated a reflective, proactive, and focused, yet realistic approach to

engaging their schools in the change process. They realized that they could not make changes for change sake, and they needed to improve teachers' commitment and sense of belonging to the community with a primary focus on relationships thus leading to improved student achievement. Successful rural principals must be concerned about effective and authentic process to make decisions, shape visions, and develop communities, and must be result-oriented to make things happen (Williams & Lindsey, 2011).

Leadership cannot be reduced to a set of defined roles and tasks (Harris, 2003b); conversely, it must widen the focus to include both formal and informal leadership tasks within a school that reflects on the complexity of principal leadership (Harris, 2003b; Lambert, 2002, Spillane et al., 2001; Spillane & Healey, 2010). Principals can engage in professional development activities that increase their conscious awareness of the values, thought processes, and behaviors that contribute to the sense they make of their own work and can contribute to a greater understanding of those around them (Lee, 1991). Educators must engage in a sensemaking experience to adopt the changes in an educational system (Spillane et al., 2002). The 12 novice, rural principals in this study indicated that much of their first year was built on sensemaking of communication and relationships.

Communication and relationships.

In all, the novice principals understood that building relationships and allowing for open communication was necessary to move their schools towards continuous improvement. In doing so, a positive school culture will be created under the novice principals' leadership. The existing research on principals' instructional leadership has

strongly reinforced the importance of positive school culture, teacher trust, and collaborative practices (Hallinger, 2011). In every participant interview, the novice, rural principal shared that their most important initial role was to build relationships. They know that without strong relationships, increased student achievement will not occur. Just like the building principal expects the teacher to build strong relationships with their students, they must do the same with their own mentees: their teachers and support staff.

Principals must have temperance and be willing to listen to others and modify their views when necessary (Williams & Lindsey, 2011). A case study of four novice principals in Texas, Nelson et al. (2008), investigated how new principals applied their educational training in principal preparation programs to their new positions. Researchers found the principals were prepared for the technical or management aspects of the work, but were challenged by developing and maintaining positive relationships. The researchers noted relationships were both “a source of angst and of support” for principals (p. 697).

The novice principals expressed a keen awareness of their communication styles and how they were developing their skills to achieve their leadership goals. The novice principals specifically talked about having empathy and compassion for their staff. They also understood their role in instructional leadership was working collaboratively. Williams and Lindsey (2011) shared that principals need to have excellent facilitation skills and should demonstrate desire and an excellence in facilitating processes and leading people in order to reach a common goal. The principal participants in this study understood that through building relationships that are characterized by genuineness, warmth, nurturance, support, and mutual respect, they could effectively guide their

teachers toward a common goal, increase staff morale, build a positive school culture, and result in increased student achievement.

All of the principals interviewed in my study shared that relationship building with numerous people in their school community is necessary to build trust. Once relationships and trust are built, the principal can tap into their teachers' and support staffs' strengths and help them grow. Building capacity is a major part of what the principal does on a daily basis when working with their teachers and support staff, while gaining appreciation for their efforts from members of the community. In all cases, the novice principals in my study know and understand that one of their main responsibilities is to help their staff grow professionally and to improve their instruction. In order to do this effectively, the novice principals must first build relationships and establish trust by being an effective communicator. Once relationships are built and trust is established, then the novice principal can focus on developing the teachers in their critical roles of educating students.

Developing Others

Each of the novice principals interviewed in my study indicated that developing others is one of their most important roles as a leader. The principals talked about developing their staff by giving them the freedom to experiment with lesson structure and encouraged them to grow by trying new things. Encouraging teachers to try new things instructionally was a responsibility they felt they had, and it was something they knew must occur to ultimately impact student learning.

The participants shared that coaching opportunities arise throughout the school year and the principal's role is to have deep conversations on their teacher's instructional

practices to build capacity. Although they shared this was one of their most impactful roles, the novice principals were well aware that building relationships with their staff needed to occur first in order to have trust built before tackling the deeper issues related to instructional practices. This was done by giving the teachers freedom to experiment with lesson structure in the classroom.

Although it is my interpretation, I argue that the principals must be willing to take the time and establish community, relationships, and trust to provide a foundation for the changes they aspired to affect. This demonstrates a level of leadership sophistication that is not often present in novice school principals. The novice, rural principals interviewed expressed a great desire to affect improvement in their schools which often conflicted with time to build relationships. Having the patience to build relationships first is especially novel for rural leadership in an environment of conflicting considerable expectations and political community positional stressors as they enact instructional leadership.

Principals gain valuable insights and skills through informal and everyday experiences and this assists principals to do commendable work in their rural communities. Because of continuous challenging dynamics and few layers of administrative staff to turn to, rural educational leaders are reliant on others to help accomplish their shared goals (Masumoto & Brown-Welty, 2009). In most cases, the participants interviewed shared that although they know that one of their main roles is to develop others, they receive limited formal training in this area from their principal preparation coursework.

One principal shared although he was a communication major in college prior to becoming a teacher, he still finds that he struggles with the type of communication he encounters on a daily basis. He knows that the primary work is about building relationships and having important conversations with his staff, but he struggles to recall specific courses he took while a communication major that helped prepare him for the types of conversations he has on a daily basis. With the limited amount of specific coursework provided to the novice principal on having important, difficult, challenging conversations, perhaps having a strong mentor as a resource will be beneficial.

The power of shared leadership and collaborative learning fosters group identity, mutual trust, and social ties. The school district's collaborative leadership approach directly correlates with the effectiveness of the school relationships. Principals who have many close ties with teachers in their schools may also have more information to share in collaboration with other principals in their district (Moolenaar & Slegers, 2015). Additionally, the principal is increasing professional aptitude and promoting continuous improvement by deliberately focusing on quality of staff to enhance professional capacity (Bryk et al., 2010). Novice principals need to be consistent in their effort to build relationships and develop others while working toward the common goal of instructional improvement.

Accountability

Every participant in my study was aware of the level of accountability for instructional improvement they held serving their school. In fact, many expressed the sheer feeling of being overwhelmed with the increased accountability as an instructional leader. They understood the extreme task of improving student achievement and took it

very seriously. The novice principals in my study knew they not only had to hold their staff accountable for the student test scores, but also knew that they must be the voice of their school when sharing the results to the school board and ultimately the rural community. Rural principals throughout the United States grapple with the challenges of school improvement focused on high-stakes testing results (Horst & Martin, 2007).

According to Loy and Boon (1998), the most effective principals are likely to be those who demonstrate a strong inclination towards leadership, specifically instructional leadership, trust, work emphasis, consideration, and adaptability. This balances against the challenge of successful principals focused primarily on learning and student achievement, especially in underperforming schools (Thessin & Clayton, 2012). A novice leader is likely to make mistakes in their decisions. A strong principal should take responsibility for the mistakes and be accountable for their decisions and actions. Doing so will bring about strong, trusting relationships between the principal and their staff. In all 12 participants, the novice, rural principals were making sense of their impact on instructional growth and understood their role in shaping and cultivating their school community to better serve their students under shared accountability. The novice, rural principals also shared it would be impactful if they had a professional in a similar role to communicate with about their work with teachers on instructional growth.

Mentorship

The findings indicate that the novice principals need a strong principal mentorship during their first few years on the job. Although the principal preparation programs cover a variety of theoretical perspectives regarding the types of leader they should become, it became clear based on my participants' feedback that the novice principals do

not reflect on that type of thinking when they are on the job. The principals indicated they are clearly reacting to the day-to-day decision making from relationship building, to having difficult conversations, to management, and how to make decisions based on limited resources.

Although the novice, rural principals feel prepared to be instructional leaders in their new building, they have many questions that come up each day that were not covered in their teaching experience or graduate preparation program. In these situations, they need experienced educational leaders with which to review their plans. Networking among other novice and tenured principals was shared as a strategy to assist them in their daily inter-workings as a rural principal. According to Williams and Lindsey (2011), through networking, principals find allies and form alliances, which are essential elements to leaders to grow and flourish.

A novice principal must develop a strong support network in their new role. A mentor program can assist in this venture, but it was also noted that the novice, rural principals found themselves calling amongst their colleagues they met while on the job or those who were part of their principal preparation program. None of the principals indicated they received any training on building schedules, wearing multiple hats in addition to being a principal, and making difficult decisions with limited resources within their school districts. They all shared the difficulties in trying to do more with less, maintaining a sense of accomplishment, and working to increase student achievement. Mentors can be instrumental in helping emerging principals with their skills and continuing education, which could include classes, workshops, clinics, or other training (Williams & Lindsey, 2011).

Building a strong, professional working relationship with their superintendent was mentioned by all participants. They expressed a need to develop or improve communication between the two allowing for a collaborative approach on their common goal of improving instructional practices. Building relationships with the superintendent can be a challenge for a rural principal because they are serving different roles. Additionally, building collegial relationships with colleagues is a challenge when they may be the only principal in their community. Participants shared that using various technological forms of communication assisted in bringing rural principals together, but these virtual efforts were not as valuable as face-to-face conversations. Therefore, it is essential for novice principals to continue to grow opportunities for collegial relationships with superintendents and other colleagues.

Understanding this, clear mentorship programs would enhance the novice, rural principals' experience as they transition into their new role. Having a strong mentor can add a sense of relief when novice, rural principals are experiencing various challenges as managers and instructional leaders. Additionally, a mentor for the novice, rural principal in close proximity and similar community size will enhance the experience and increase the opportunity for success.

Research Question 2

Next I will discuss Research Question 2: What are the most emergent leadership challenges that novice, rural principals identify as they transitioned into a building principal position? In rural schools, the principal is a prominent member of the community (Arnold et al., 2005). Rural communities are underrepresented in the broader educational leadership literature, and are characterized by a strong "sense of place"

(Bauch, 2001, p. 205). Residents in rural areas value the bonds created through personal, social connectedness that are also reflected in the small, positive school cultures in rural schools (Bauch, 2001). Residents of rural communities view them as safer and more connected, and for many, the aesthetic quality of life is important (Bauch, 2001).

The novice, rural principals in my study noted that they were active in their community, yet if they did not make it to every community event, they were questioned by various stakeholders. The ability to balance daily work responsibilities, evening supervision, and support of student responsibilities is a challenge they all experience. Balancing this against their own commitment to their family added additional stress to an already stressful and transparent job as a building principal leading in a rural school district.

As stated in the significance of the study, developing the capacity of their schools to provide successful educational experiences for all students is an ongoing professional challenge for on-site principals (Lee, 1991). Rural community members possess a strong sense of belonging, pride, and appreciation for their community. Because the culture of the rural schools reflects the characteristics of the immediate community, the concept of change is often a controversial issue for rural principals (Preston et al., 2014). Limited research has focused on novice principals in rural school districts, and specifically limited research on the multiple roles they must play in a smaller school environment. The smaller size of their schools can be seen as an asset, as is the strength of relationships among the people who make up the schools and communities (Redding & Walberg, 2012).

For principals in rural schools, the superintendent and school board establish the goals, but the professional development planning and implementation falls on their shoulders. It takes considerable time for school leaders to develop their capacity in communication, building relationships, collaboration, teamwork, and resilience. School administrators with direct, positive approaches can enhance their practices and create school-wide capacity for improvement. School leaders need to be equipped with the breadth of modern experiences and applicable skills, so they can tackle the challenge and complexity of their leadership roles in a rural setting. Information gleaned by current novice, rural principals can benefit those in getting professional support through transition into a building principal when tackling a variety of administrative tasks and responsibilities.

Six specific challenges emerged from the novice, rural principal interviews to help answer question number 2 of the study. The challenges of working with and understanding special education, addressing non-special education student behavior, management responsibilities, limited resources and finances, breadth of responsibility, and the reality of being in a rural community.

Special Education

An area that became apparent during the interview process was the need to know and understand special education practices, procedures, and law. According to Kucharczyk et al. (2015), studies indicate educators report having limited opportunities to obtain information about the execution of evidence-based practices with their special education students and may feel poorly prepared to adopt promising interventions. A few participants started their teaching careers as special education teachers, and they

expressed how valuable it was to bring that experience into their new principal role. Those few principals felt that without that background, they would not be able to move their school into the direction they needed. They felt the level of expertise in special education was essential to their success as they transitioned into their new role.

The majority of the novice principals admitted that they had no or minimal knowledge in special education and felt extremely overwhelmed by the sheer amount of special education student behaviors and discipline they had to encounter in their schools. This did not include the challenges of understanding Individualized Education Program plans, instructional accommodations for students, and working with parents of special need students. The novice, rural principals recall having one special education law class while obtaining their principal certificate. The novice, rural principals shared that a single class focused on special educational law was not enough to prepare them for what they would face. Additionally, their graduate programs offered little preparation in the practical, daily breadth of special education responsibilities essential to effective leadership in their schools.

Non-Special Education Student Behavior

The discussion of non-special education behaviors the principals dealt with on a daily basis were often extreme for some of the novice, rural principals. Undesired behaviors in classrooms and schools have been dramatically increasing in schools (Bayar, 2016). While reflecting on the balancing of responsibilities, the principals shared that the daily student behaviors took precedent over everything else in their building. Bayar (2016), has noted that undesired behaviors are a serious issue facing schools today. The novice, rural principals knew their number one role was to improve student achievement,

yet clearly felt that until the student behaviors had been addressed and were under control, limited learning would occur and student achievement would not improve.

According to Horst and Martin (2007), the magnitude of poverty can overpower some small rural schools, including more likelihood of learning disabilities, low test scores and special needs. They also knew that although the teachers appreciated that the novice, rural principal was addressing student behavior issues, other managerial and leadership responsibilities were being placed low on the principals' daily list, thus frustrating the teachers. According to Bayar (2016), the principal of the school must find a way to overcome the student behaviors in order to create a more effective school climate.

As one novice, rural principal shared, they were unprepared for the level of student and adult mental health issues they would face. This aligns with concerns regarding student behavioral issues, and is an area of preparation for which the novice, rural principal has received little to no training. Therefore, introducing preparation programs with a deeper emphasis on student and adult mental health issues could be an invaluable addition to master's or doctoral course curriculum, as well as teacher development courses for principals.

Management Responsibilities

In a systematic review of the rural schools' leadership research literature published internationally from 2003-2013, Preston et al. (2014) found several themes that are relevant to this current study. Their review found rural principals are often isolated in their positions, and are positioned as "instructional experts" by their faculty and staff (p. 7). This was also found in my study. Rural instructional leaders embrace stakeholder

collaboration and need to be responsive to the needs of the people in their schools and surrounding communities (Preston et al., 2014).

The novice, rural principals in my study shared it was critical that they communicate their purpose behind their thinking in order to move an initiative forward. For example, in a cross case analysis of four principals in three districts in California, researchers Masumoto and Brown-Welty (2009) found rural principals fostered high levels of engagement and collaboration with parents, students, teachers, and local community leaders. They also identified leaders who focused on high expectations for instruction, teacher performance, and meeting students' needs.

In another example, Starr and White (2008) investigated the leadership challenges of 76 principals in rural areas of Australia in response to policy reforms. They found rural principals were constrained by resources and reported high levels of work responsibilities and time-management difficulties. They also found the principals were strategic in how they built relationships and collaborations with community stakeholders. This was also found in my study. The novice, rural principals shared that they built strong relationships with specific members of the community in order to enhance a collaborative process.

In another example that portrayed a different set of findings, five novice principals provided work logs and were interviewed in Scotland to learn about their experiences as new leaders (Cowie & Crawford, 2008). Among a multitude of management concerns that ranged from bullying to staff absences, the researchers noted that the principals quickly recognized the importance of rising above task-driven work,

with an increased focus on community building and school culture. This was also validated in my research.

In a rural setting, the importance of shared decision making around community goals, needs, and the purpose of schooling is paramount (Bauch, 2001). Partnerships between the rural school and community must be built on relationships that show mutual trust and provide opportunities for those in the community to have their voices heard in the decision-making process. Without these elements, decisions may be made without various stakeholders' views being considered; therefore, the decisions may not be readily accepted by the community.

Resources and Finances

Although findings of this study cannot be considered typical experiences for all who transition into a novice principal role, this research adds to the literature about novice, rural principals and their leadership practices. Based on the findings in this study, I found this small sample of novice, rural principals in a U.S. Midwestern state encountered challenges similar to all principals, but their challenges were amplified due to their leadership practices that span multiple roles in the midst of significant resource constraints.

In this study, the novice, rural principals all experienced receiving no or minimal allowable-growth funding by the state legislature. In every participant case, the rural school districts represented were experiencing declining student enrollment because the majority of families were moving to suburban or urban settings for employment. Because of declining enrollment, the school districts were experiencing persistent budget cuts thus impacting the culture and climate of their schools. In response

to the cuts, the principals found themselves doing more with less in their schools, thus adding yet another layer of challenges to their role. The rural school must rely more heavily on its own resources and creativity to drive its improvement (Redding & Walberg, 2012). Rural schools are pressed to build capacity, and principals have to absorb and complete more administrative and management tasks with less resources.

Breadth of Responsibility

The research intersections of rural context and principals' instructional leadership reveal principals' challenges to balance multiple job responsibilities within a rural community that relies heavily on their leadership and visibility. The sheer breadth of responsibility assumed by the rural principal can be extremely daunting; consequently, at times, their role can seem nearly impossible to complete with fidelity. Moreover, the principal in a rural school faces additional challenges as they must assume countless roles often shared by several individuals in larger schools (Horst & Martin, 2007). Previous literature on novice school principals demonstrates how novice leaders have difficulty navigating the various expectations of management and leadership demands during their initial years on the job. Most of the principals' time is spent attending to parent issues, community-related tasks, and discipline, allowing for very little time to be devoted to instructional leadership, or teaching and learning (Renihan & Noonan, 2011). In addition, limited resources require rural schools to do more with less and many rural principals find themselves wearing multiple hats within their role in the school district.

In several cases within my participants, the novice, rural principals were also special education directors, curriculum directors, English as a Second Language (ESL) coordinators, Talented & Gifted coordinators and preschool directors. The participants in

my study found themselves wearing so many hats that trying to balance their various roles was difficult, which adversely impacted their overall performance. Several novice, rural principals in my study shared that they felt stretched very thin when fulfilling all of their job responsibilities and wanted to do their very best, but struggled in doing so. Many felt that they needed to conduct additional research on their own in order to acquire additional knowledge about the multiple responsibilities they had acquired.

Reality of Being Rural

Because leadership in rural schools cannot be removed from the historical and social practices of the immediate community, rural principals must be able to navigate and intervene relations within the local community and school system (Preston et al., 2014). The novice, rural principals in my study all spoke about understanding the community in which they serve to best impact their schools. Research highlights that rural principals commonly face specific sociocultural and socioeconomic challenges associated with the school community (Preston et al., 2014).

Personal and historical ties to the community were related to the successes of the rural principal because they had a greater understanding and deep appreciation for the values, priorities, and culture of the community (Preston et al., 2014). The pressure is significant for novice principals to immediately excel in rural settings. This is a challenge when there are specific problems of practice noted, including a lack of research in this area, to guide novice principal development. The novice, rural principals in my study felt their preparation for the breadth of responsibility was weak, which presented a significant challenge to their efforts to build relationships and serve as an instructional leader.

Remoteness

Similar to findings in previous research on rural settings, the remoteness of a rural community may be a barrier in attracting and retaining school leaders. The school's internal systems for ensuring consistent application of effective practice is paramount. Policies, programs, procedures and practices must be engrained in the daily operations of the school to optimize the productivity of the current staff (Redding & Walberg, 2012). The rural school must rely on its own resources to drive improvement and those resources are its people; thus it is imperative that rural principals wear multiple hats in the school system.

Previous research on rural school leadership has identified leaders' feelings of isolation and detachment from colleagues as common administrative concerns (Clarke & Wildy, 2004; Preston et al., 2014). In my findings, the novice principals echoed this recurring challenge to their leadership, professional development, and growth. The principals' feelings of professional isolation, of being "on" and working in a "bubble" was further complicated by balancing the demands of their personal and professional lives. Also, similar to previous research on novice principals, the principals expressed difficulties with balancing multiple roles and responsibilities in their positions (Starr & White, 2008). In particular, they described human resources' responsibilities that would normally fall to a district-level department or leadership team. Their districts also employed organizational structures that assigned intersecting responsibilities to principals and superintendents in response to budgetary constraints. With so many duties, they had difficulty expressing all the tasks and functions they fulfilled on a daily basis.

The novice, rural principals in my study felt that their move to a remote setting was a risk for them and their family. They knew that leaving their teacher colleagues behind from their former school district was a gamble, yet they knew that in order to advance themselves as a leader, this was what had to be done. These professionals often experienced moving into a school that had multiple leadership changes within a few years. They recognized that they were often following principals who were pursuing advancement in their career which required beginning in a rural setting for a few years before moving to larger districts where greater pay and career opportunities were enhanced.

Vulnerability

The novice, rural principals' feelings of isolation coupled with intense and changeable job responsibilities impacted their professional as well as their personal lives. The principals' interpretations of their position and stature in the community was not straightforward, and portrayed a process whereby they were continuously trying to balance their obligations to their schools, communities, and families. On the one hand, they all embraced their prominent roles in their communities. Samantha admitted, "I feel like a rock star"—wherever she goes people recognized her, asked how she was doing, and genuinely care about her and her family. While this is her impression, other principals shared their failure to feel a part of the community and to be personally welcomed. While others admitted to being a recognized person, they often felt isolated within the community.

The rural, novice principals also described ways in which they were challenged to find privacy and escape the pressures of the job. They each tried to purposefully create

private space for reflection, down time, self-care and family time. In addition, their focus on building relationships and healthy communications with stakeholders could simultaneously be a leadership strategy and a human coping mechanism. They realized quickly that leadership in rural schools is a community wide endeavor, and they could not do it alone.

Because schools are highly visible in the community, school leaders were vulnerable and open to intense scrutiny and criticism by community members (Masumoto & Brown-Welty, 2009). While the centrality of the school to rural community life may be an asset, it also places added demands on educators to serve functions beyond that of its primary purpose of education (Redding & Walberg, 2012). Because of the centrality within the community, rural schools routinely connect with families in multiple capacities as part of typical daily routines (Redding & Walberg, 2012).

In many ways, rural schools are benefited by school boards with an entrusted interest in the security of their rural communities, school personnel who accept wide duties for their students' success, close knit families, copious social capital and the core of the school in community life (Redding & Walberg, 2012). Rural schools provide opportunities for community communication and participation, especially when the school is desiring to introduce new initiatives. The novice, rural principals in my study shared their level of vulnerability in their new roles and how it could positively impact their success as a rural principal. Each novice, rural principal recognized that their community each had its own feel and culture, and it was their job to learn as much as they could, as fast as they could, to be well received as a contributing member of the community.

Community Culture

As put forth in my study, the local school is the point of pride for the community and houses sporting and cultural events, civic activities, shelter during severe weather, and even funerals for iconic community members. Teachers serve as coaches and club sponsors, which means they have frequent contact with multiple-aged groups and varying academic levels of students. Principals are often highly accessible, active members of the community, allowing them to connect with families in the community in a variety of ways (Redding & Walberg, 2012).

According to Barley and Beesley (2007), the social capital inherent to communities in that people live in close proximity, are bound by multiple relationships, and have personal connections to one another and to each other's children is of immeasurable value. Parents in rural schools attend school events more often than in urban and suburban communities, but they also talk less often with their children about school programs and interact less frequently with teachers than parents in other settings (Prater, Bermudez, & Owens, 1997). This information is critical for the novice, rural principal to know and understand as they navigate their role in family engagement in their communities.

In closely knit rural communities, a skepticism of "outsiders" often places barriers to collaboration between new school personnel and families (Redding & Walberg, 2012). It is essential that the rural principal quickly become part of the community and learn the dynamics of the community in which they serve, so they can best meet the needs of their students and families. Several of the novice, rural principals in my study shared that they are not residents in the community in which they serve as the school

principal and that has posed a challenge. Although it is not required for the rural principal to live in the community they work, it is an unspoken expectation and something that can cause strife with some community members. The participants in my study appeared to be cognizant of their communities and knew that this was a critical component to their success.

Limitations

I cannot claim that these novice principals enacted or effectively implemented the leadership actions they described in our interviews. The study is also limited by a small sample of novice principals from one U.S. Midwestern state, the participant's subjective response bias, and recall inconsistencies. My findings cannot be generalized to other school settings, rural schools, or novice leaders. However, this study presents important evidence to consider regarding rural school leadership, particularly how novice principals can orient their leadership philosophies and practices to make impactful decisions to improve school cultures based on strengthening relationships, mutual accountability, and instructional expectations.

Lessons Learned by the Researcher

It has been an honor to serve as a doctoral candidate at Iowa State University and take on a role as a researcher collecting and analyzing data related to principals' experiences in a U.S. Midwestern state. Throughout the research process, I concurrently held a district-level position in the same state as a rural principal, rural superintendent, and suburban district office director. My job is one with many responsibilities; I helped lead a school district in every capacity, including coordinating curriculum, assessment, technology integration, special education, preschool coordination, professional

development, and principal mentorship. I hold an administrative license and during the time of the research I held a principal role, took on my first superintendency, and then became a district office director in a neighboring suburban school district. I have grown professionally in ways I had not imagined. My doctoral coursework focused on educational leadership theories that reminded me of what I had also learned during coursework for my first administration degree. I networked with other district administrators and specifically became involved in mentoring novice principals as they learned to navigate the numerous challenges they face as new administrators.

I began this study after I had mentored one principal in his transition from teacher to dean of students to assistant principal to head principal in the same school building he had taught in for 14 years. After experiencing success with this mentorship, this afforded me the opportunity to mentor more principals as they made the transition into building principals. I reflected on the actions principals use to guide their decision making and, in turn, refined my own actions to help build strong and confident novice principals, thus increasing my own understanding of positive instructional leadership. In doing so, I now have a strong sense of urgency in helping novice, rural principals throughout the state understand the leadership challenges that many face and the huge responsibility that one faces in doing all one can to improve the educational system and ultimately improve student achievement.

Implications for Research

The study explored the transitional challenges the novice, rural principals face as instructional leaders. The context of the study focused on principals serving in rural school districts. Findings from the study are not generalizable to other states. The

themes describing the sensemaking and leading processes of principals may, however, illuminate processes applicable to other novice, rural principals across the country.

The role of a principal in a rural setting is an intriguing finding in this study. Although they hold all the responsibilities of any other principal, leading a school in a rural setting adds another sense of responsibility. Rural principals are not only instructional leaders, but are also embedded into the community and know the students and families in a very unique way.

My research found that leading in a rural setting affords the principal the opportunity to also know many in the community. Many of the families served have been in the community for generations and their parents, grandparents, aunts, and uncles all attended the school that their children, grandchildren, nieces, and nephews are currently attending. A great sense of ownership and history plays a part in the school; consequently, it is imperative that the rural principal understands the inner workings of the school and community.

The novice, rural principals in my study followed the vision for school improvement and instructional leadership, but also worked within the vision to influence growth within the school in which they served and the various stakeholders in the community. The participants in my study actively worked to represent the voices of all novice, rural principals within their district, neighboring districts, and the state.

Recommendation number one: In research, the influence of the novice, rural principal should be compared and contrasted to similar roles held by community leaders within other professional organizations like members of city governments. Findings of

this study further draws attention to the multiple layers of being a rural instructional leader.

Recommendation number two: Although the novice and rural principal literatures can appear to be homogenous, further research on rural school leadership should include more voices from novice leaders to determine how they approach the myriad of responsibilities that accompany the position. More specifically, it is important to remember that rural school leadership is exemplified by similar notions of community, isolation, and constrained resources—but rural settings are all varied, unique, and deserve continued rigorous study.

Implications for Practice

I sought to learn how novice, rural school leaders identified and addressed their leadership for learning priorities as they began their tenure as principals. Based on my findings and the comparable extant literature on rural school leadership, principals continue to experience changeable and excessive workloads, and feelings of isolation in their roles as rural school leaders. The role of the principal in rural schools continues to be a centrally-located position in the school and the wider community. That level of stature and recognition in the community is admirable, yet it can also create pressures on individual principals to ensure positive outcomes and success.

However, the novice principals in this study exemplified refined approaches to their instructional leadership philosophies and goal setting. They demonstrated a notable counter narrative to the frantic and overwhelmed novice rural school leader. Their narratives reflected instructional leadership priorities that were rooted in culture-building, relationships with stakeholders, and high expectations. They adopted a broader concept

of their leadership practices that were rooted in professional values and attributes that they believed would support their schools during the improvement process. Regardless, novice, rural principals need specific support.

Recommendation number one: It is recommended that the novice, rural principals be assigned a mentor to assist them during their transition during their first three years. It is highly recommended that the assigned mentor also serve in a rural setting similar in size of their mentee. Having a mentor with similar demographics and size will greatly impact the positive transition that the novice, rural principal will face. The mentor-mentee relationship needs to be fluid so that either principal can easily call upon the other for advice and support. Additionally, the mentor and mentee need to have specific days during the school year wherein they engage in face-to-face meetings to review management and instructional leadership guidance. It is strongly recommended that the mentee bring real-life examples of situations they are dealing with to allow the mentor to provide support and guidance. It is also recommended that the mentor and mentee attend an educational training together to be able to learn and reflect on current educational practices as a team.

Recommendation number two: It is also recommended that novice, rural principals receive ongoing training and support in working with students with special needs, especially students with behavioral challenges. Additionally, the novice, rural principals need to work directly with their special education teachers in assisting them as they navigate their school day with challenging behaviors. The principal needs guidance to support their general and special education teachers, so they can support all the students in their classroom on a daily basis.

Recommendation number three: Novice, rural principals receive ongoing training and support centered on working with adults. Transitioning from managing a classroom full of children to managing a school full of adults can be a challenge. The school district should encourage and allow the principals to receive training to learn how to work with adults and to learn how to have tough conversations. This type of training can assist the principals as they have daily, informal conversations as well as having formal conversations targeting instructional improvement to increase student achievement. This training will also assist the novice, rural principal as they build relationships with their colleagues, thus allowing trust to develop, to ultimately build capacity.

Implications for Preparation

More study of novice rural leaders' strategies for self-care and sustaining their careers would contribute to the field by increasing understanding of how to help early career leaders be successful over time.

Recommendation number one: Principal preparation programs should consider how curriculum and field experience internships meet new rural leaders' needs regarding a system-level approach to rural school leadership. More preparation around the rural school district's layers of intricacies would help prepare the novice, rural principal.

Five of the interview participants shared they were grateful they had been special education teachers prior to becoming a principal and could not imagine doing the job without that training. Additionally, several of the principals who were not practicing special education teachers prior to becoming a principal, shared they believed they needed more special education training during their principal preparation

programs. They felt at a disadvantage when serving as the school's leader without detailed special education training.

Recommendation number two: Principal preparation programs should consider how special education students and decisions impact the school environment and require future principals to take more courses on the subject of student disabilities, and how to serve those students with behavioral needs.

School districts in this U.S. Midwestern state are already given financial gains if school districts choose to share superintendents, business managers, curriculum directors, and so on. In the foreseeable future, rural principals will be asked to do even more with less, and cover a greater share of leadership responsibilities.

Recommendation number three: Principal preparation programs should integrate additional study and field work that includes greater attention to the variety of managerial and leadership functions principals will be required to fulfill in rural settings. Since the majority of school districts are in a rural setting, this includes learning all the necessary roles that are needed to run a successful school district in preparation to assume multiple responsibilities within a rural setting.

As a leader of the rural school, novice principals must find a balance of managerial duties and instructional leadership. When managing a school, the principals must be able to work and communicate effectively with the various adults in the school building.

Recommendation number four: Principal preparation programs should integrate additional study focused on understanding generational differences and adult behavior.

The superintendent and the school board representing the rural school district needs to understand the diverse challenges of the novice, rural principal and how to help guide them as they venture into their new role. Close oversight of the school by the school board with strong commitment to the rural community can be an advantage.

Recommendation number five: The school board and superintendent need to have a greater understanding of the challenges facing novice principals, establish specific goals for improvement, and recognize that much of their first-year work should focus on building school and community relations. Future trainings are recommended for superintendents to assist in the role of mentoring novice principals. They must be patient, caring, and understanding with the myriad of challenges the new role presents to the novice, rural principal.

Conclusions

I reported on a phenomenological study of the leadership experiences of 12 novice, rural principals in a Midwestern U.S. state. I situated my study and analysis within the existing research on leadership, particularly how novice principals prioritized their instructional leadership goals and identified their challenges in the context of rural school leadership. Rural communities, by definition, are small and geographically remote, as are their schools. It is the low population density together with family isolation and community remoteness that uniquely characterizes rural areas (Redding & Walberg, 2012). Based on my findings and the comparable extant literature on rural school leadership, principals continue to experience changeable and excessive workloads, limited resources, and feelings of isolation in their roles as rural school leaders.

The role of the principal in rural schools continues to be a centrally-located position in the school and the wider community. The level of stature and recognition in the community is admirable, yet it can also create pressures on individual principals to ensure positive outcomes and successes. However, the novice principals in this study exemplified refined approaches to their instructional leadership philosophies and the challenges they faced serving in a rural context.

The principals in my study exhibited sophisticated leadership approaches to facilitate their instructional leadership specifically noting that developing positive school cultures and communicating high instructional performance expectations were priorities during the early stages of their tenure. All 12 of the participants in my study shared the need as instructional leaders for communication and relationships, developing others, shared accountability, and mentorship assistance. Within the rural setting, multiple challenges came to light including special education procedures, processes and law, addressing non-special education student behavior, managing responsibilities with limited resources and finances, understanding the breadth of responsibility, the reality of being in a rural community as they serve in their school district, and creating community and school culture.

Currently rural principals are asked to do more with less and cover a greater amount of leadership responsibilities. The time demands are significant along with the learning curve related to special education, student behavior, and understanding the community. Novice, rural principals must spend a significant amount of time building relationships prior to initiating change. Often those relationships are established through management and student discipline strategies in the building resulting in creating a well-

managed school. This provides confidence from those they are leading, allowing for future, more significant impact on instructional improvement. This study emphasized the impact of isolation in the rural environment, and the need for the novice, rural principal to understand and appreciate the school and community culture in order to gain support for need improvements in the instructional program.

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APPENDIX A. INFORMED CONSENT DOCUMENT

**Title of Study: Principals' Early Career Experience in Rural Schools:
Transitional Challenges They Face**

Investigators: Carolyn Manard, M.S. Ed., Superintendent, Meskwaki Settlement School/Director of Special Education, Anekeny CSD, Ph.D student in Educational Administration, Iowa State University, Dr. Doug Wieczorek, Assistant Professor College of Education, Iowa State University

This form describes a research project. It has information to help you decide whether or not you wish to participate. Research studies include only people who choose to take part—your participation is completely voluntary. Please discuss any questions you have about the study or about this form with the project staff before deciding to participate.

Introduction

The purpose of this study is to investigate the problems of practice experienced by novice rural public school principals as they transition into their new occupation, focusing in particular on the first three years on the job. Information learned can give guidance to superintendents as they hire and mentor novice rural public school principals.

You are being invited to participate in this study because you are a novice rural public school principal and are in your first three years as a new principal.

Description of Procedures

If you agree to participate, you will be asked to participate and answer interview questions over two sessions in a one-on-one format. These interviews may take place periodically over the next 12 months. The conversation and responses will be audiotape recorded by the researcher. This will take approximately 1-1.5 hours of your time per session. We may also contact you by email or telephone after the initial interview to review your responses or to ask you follow-up clarifying questions. All information will be kept confidential.

We would like to audio record our one-on-one interview with you for the purposes of data collection, record keeping, and data analysis. The transcribed version of the recordings will be kept for a period of seven years after any subsequent publications have been completed. The recording will be erased at the conclusion of the study.

Information gathered and learned will be shared with the School Administrators of Iowa organization to enhance their principal mentor program.

Risks or Discomforts

The risks to you for participating in this study are minimal. While participating in this study you may experience the following risks or discomforts:

- Feeling uncertainty or anxiety while being interviewed
- Feeling uncomfortable while completing the interview.
- Risks of expressing your ideas, views, and experiences regarding taking on the new role of building principal and how it impacts your life
- Risk to your employment because you are going to share information about how you perform your job
- Risk of breach of confidentiality that your identity could be discovered, however unlikely

Benefits

If you decide to participate in this study, there may be no direct benefit to you. It is hoped that the information gained in this study will benefit society by helping administrators understand how to better prepare principals as they transition in their new role.

Costs and Compensation

You will not have any costs from participating in this study. You will not be compensated for participating in this study.

Participant Rights

Participating in this study is completely voluntary. You may choose not to take part in the study or to stop participating at any time, for any reason, without penalty or negative consequences. You can skip any questions that you do not wish to answer. Your choice of whether or not to participate will have no impact on you as an employee in any way.

For further information about the study, contact Carolyn Manard, M.S.Ed. at 515-298-0573, csclark1@isu.edu, 1304 Noble Lynx Drive, Boone, Iowa 50036 or Dr. Doug Wieczorek at 515-294-4486, dwieczorek@iastate.edu, 2683 Lagomarcino Hall, Ames, Iowa 50011. If you have any questions about the rights of research subjects or research-related injury, please contact the IRB Administrator, (515) 294-4566, IRB@iastate.edu, or Director, (515) 294-3115, Office for Responsible Research, Iowa State University, Ames, Iowa 50011.

Confidentiality

We cannot completely guarantee confidentiality. There is a risk that you or your school district could be identified. These risks will be minimized by limiting access to the data collection and analysis to Carolyn Manard, MS Ed. and Dr. Doug Wieczorek. We will also change your name, school name, district name, and any other identifiable information in any conference papers or publications. We will assign a coded number to your responses, and only members of the research team will have the key to indicate which number belongs to which participant. In any articles we write or any presentations that we make, we will use a made-up name for you, and we will not reveal personal

details about you or identifiable details about the school, school district, or school community.

Title of Study: **Principals' Early Career Experience in Rural Schools: Transitional Challenges they Face**

Audio Recording Consent:

_____ I agree to be audio recorded

_____ I do not agree to be audio recorded

Consent and Authorization Provisions

Your signature indicates that you voluntarily agree to participate in this study, that the study has been explained to you, that you have been given the time to read the document, and that your questions have been satisfactorily answered. You will receive a copy of the written informed consent prior to your participation in the study.

Participant's Name (printed) _____

Participant's Signature

Date

Researcher's Signature

Date

Carolyn Manard, M.S.Ed
Superintendent/Director of SPED
Meskwaki Settlement School/Ankeny CSD
Ph.D. Candidate
Iowa State University

Dr. Doug Wieczorek
Iowa State University
Assistant Professor
College of Education
College of Education

APPENDIX B. SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Title: Principals' Early Career Experience using Instructional Leadership
in Rural Schools:
Transitional Challenges They Face

Purpose: The purpose of this study is to identify the challenges facing novice, rural principals as they strive to perform a role demanding a breadth of management and instructional leadership responsibilities.

Investigators: Carolyn Manard, M.S. Ed., Superintendent, Meskwaki Settlement School/Director of Special Education, Ankeny CSD, Ph.D student in Educational Administration, Iowa State University.

Interview Questions:

Challenges Being a New Principal using Sensemaking/Experiences while Transitioning

1. What was your path into education and administration?
 - A. How do you think your path guided your thinking in becoming a principal?
2. How have you interpreted the events that you have experienced in the transition in terms of instructional leadership?
3. Please share two-three goals for your first three years as principal in terms of instructional leadership.
4. What did you expect the major challenges to be in your new role?
 - A. Were those the challenges you experienced?
5. What do you feel your role is in developing others?
 - A. What does it mean to you as an instructional leader given you have the responsibility in developing others in their field?
6. What do you think has gone as expected in your new role as an instructional leader?
 - A. Why do you believe they have gone as expected?
7. Has anything been surprising in your new role as principal in the area of instructional leadership?
8. What do you interpret as your greatest challenge as an instructional leader/principal?

Challenges as an Instructional Leader using Sensemaking

9. What does instructional leadership mean to you?
10. What are some indicators of an effective instructional leader?
11. How do you think an effective principal is viewed?
12. What aspects of instructional leadership do you focus on?
13. What is your instructional improvement focus?
14. How do you foster collaborative leadership as an instructional leader?
15. What do you think are your future goals as a principal?
16. What do you think your staff would say about your leadership?
 - A. How do you interpret what they are saying and how you are responding?

Challenges as a Rural Principal using Sensemaking

17. What can you tell me about your understanding about rural school leadership?
 - A. Can you tell me a bit about your rural community?
18. What would you interpret as your challenges working in a rural setting? In what areas are your challenges?
19. How do you perceive your role as working with various stakeholders in a rural setting?
 - A. How do you interact with the community in your position?
20. Can you explain some aspects of rural school contexts that are unique?
 - A. How do you perceive the school's role in the rural community?
21. How do you interpret the uniqueness with being a principal in a rural school?

APPENDIX C. INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL

IOWA STATE UNIVERSITY
OF SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

Institutional Review Board
Office for Responsible Research
Vice President for Research
2420 Lincoln Way, Suite 202
Ames, Iowa 50012
515 294-4566

Date: 2/22/2017

To: Carolyn Manard
1304 Noble Lynx Drive
Boone, IA 50036

CC: Dr. Douglas Weczorek
2683 Lagomarcino Hall

From: Office for Responsible Research

Title: Principal Early Career Experience using Instructional Leadership in Rural Schools: Transitional Challenges They Face

IRB ID: 16-103

Approval Date: 2/22/2017 **Date for Continuing Review:** 3/21/2018

Submission Type: Modification **Review Type:** Expedited

The project referenced above has received approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Iowa State University according to the dates shown above. Please refer to the IRB ID number shown above in all correspondence regarding this study.

To ensure compliance with federal regulations (45 CFR 46 & 21 CFR 56), please be sure to:

- **Use only the approved study materials** in your research, including the recruitment materials and informed consent documents that have the IRB approval stamp.
- **Retain signed informed consent documents for 3 years after the close of the study**, when documented consent is required.
- **Obtain IRB approval prior to implementing any changes** to the study by submitting a Modification Form for Non-Exempt Research or Amendment for Personnel Changes form, as necessary.
- **Immediately inform the IRB of (1) all serious and/or unexpected adverse experiences** involving risks to subjects or others; and (2) **any other unanticipated problems** involving risks to subjects or others.
- **Stop all research activity if IRB approval lapses**, unless continuation is necessary to prevent harm to research participants. Research activity can resume once IRB approval is reestablished.
- **Complete a new continuing review form at least three to four weeks prior to the date for continuing review** as noted above to provide sufficient time for the IRB to review and approve continuation of the study. We will send a courtesy reminder as this date approaches.

Please be aware that IRB approval means that you have met the requirements of federal regulations and ISU policies governing human subjects research. **Approval from other entities may also be needed.** For example, access to data from private records (e.g. student, medical, or employment records, etc.) that are protected by FERPA, HIPAA, or other confidentiality policies requires permission from the holders of those records. Similarly, for research conducted in institutions other than ISU (e.g., schools, other colleges or universities, medical facilities, companies, etc.), investigators must obtain permission from the institution(s) as required by their policies. **IRB approval in no way implies or guarantees that permission from these other entities will be granted.**

Upon completion of the project, please submit a Project Closure Form to the Office for Responsible Research, 202 Kingland, to officially close the project.

Please don't hesitate to contact us if you have questions or concerns at 515-294-4566 or IRB@iastate.edu.

IOWA STATE UNIVERSITY

OF SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

Institutional Review Board
Office for Responsible Research
Vice President for Research
1138 Pearson Hall
Ames, Iowa 50011-2307
515.284.4380
FAX 515.284.4381

Date: 3/30/2016

To: Dr. Carolyn Manard
1304 Noble Lynx Drive
Boone, IA 50036

CC: Dr. Douglas Wleczonik
2663 Lagomarcino Hall

From: Office for Responsible Research

Title: Principals' Early Career Experience in Rural Schools: Transitional Challenges they Face

IRB ID: 15-103

Approval Date: 3/30/2016 **Date for Continuing Review:** 3/21/2018

Submission Type: New **Review Type:** Full Committee

The project referenced above has received approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Iowa State University according to the dates shown above. Please refer to the IRB ID number shown above in all correspondence regarding this study.

To ensure compliance with federal regulations (45 CFR 46 & 21 CFR 56), please be sure to:

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Upon completion of the project, please submit a Project Closure Form to the Office for Responsible Research, 1138 Pearson Hall, to officially close the project.

Please don't hesitate to contact us if you have questions or concerns at 515-284-4566 or IRB@iastate.edu.